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THE ROUGON-MACQUART

La Curée

VOL. I

Chapter I

"Dinner is served, madame."

Then, slowly, the procession formed. Saccard gave his arm to the little marquise; Renée took the arm of an old gentleman, a senator, the Baron Gouraud, before whom everybody bowed down with great humility.

THE MASTERPIECES OF

EMILE ZOLA

La Curée

VOLUME I

NOW FIRST COMPLETELY TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH BY
A. TEIXEIRA DE MATTOS, WITH ETCHINGS AFTER
PAINTINGS BY AUGUSTE FRANCOIS GORGUET

WITH INTRODUCTIONS BY

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LA CURÉE

CHAPTER I

On the drive home, the calash could make but little way against the obstruction of carriages returning by the edge of the lake. At one moment the block became such that it was even necessary to pull up.

The sun was setting in a pale gray October sky, streaked on the horizon with thin clouds. One last ray, falling from the distant shrubberies of the cascade, pierced the roadway, and flooded the long array of stationary carriages with pale red light. The golden glints, the bright flashes thrown by the wheels, seemed to have settled along the straw-coloured edges of the calash, while the dark-blue panels reflected bits of the surrounding landscape. And higher up, full in the red light that lit them up from behind, and gave effulgence to the brass buttons of their capes half-folded across the back of the box, sat the coachman and footman, in their dark-blue liveries, their drab breeches, and their yellow-and-black striped waistcoats, erect, solemn and patient, after the manner

of well-bred servants who are in no way put out by a block of carriages. Their hats, adorned with black cockades, looked very dignified. The horses alone, a pair of splendid bays, snorted with impatience.

"Look," said Maxime, "Laure d'Aurigny, over there, in that brougham . . . . Do look, Renée."

Renée raised herself slightly, and blinked her eyes with the exquisite grimace caused by the shortness of her sight.

"I thought she had vanished from the scene," said Renée . . . . "She has changed the colour of her hair, has she not?"

"Yes," replied Maxime, laughing; "her new lover hates red."

Awakened from the melancholy dream that for an hour had kept her silent, stretched out in the back seat of the carriage as in an invalid's long-chair, Renée leaned forward and looked, resting her hand on the low door of the calash. Over a gown consisting of a mauve silk polonaise and tunic, trimmed with wide plaited flounces, she wore a little coat of white cloth with mauve velvet lapels, which gave her a look of great smartness. Her strange, pale, fawn-coloured hair, whose shade recalled the colour of good butter, was barely concealed by a tiny bonnet adorned with a cluster of Bengal roses. She continued to screw up her eyes with her look of an impertinent boy, her pure forehead furrowed by one long wrinkle, her upper lip protruding like a sulky child's. Then, finding that she could not see, she took her eye-glass, a man's double eye-glass framed in tortoise-shell, and, holding it in her hand without placing it on her nose,

at her ease examined the fat Laure d'Aurigny, with an air of absolute calmness.

The carriages were still blocked. Among the massed dark patches made by the long line of broughams, of which numbers that autumn afternoon had crowded to the Bois, gleamed the glass of a carriage-window, the bit of a bridle, the plated socket of a lamp, the braid on the livery of a lackey perched on his box. Here and there a bit of stuff, a bit of a woman's dress, silk or velvet, flashed from an open landau. Little by little a deep silence had taken the place of all the bustle that now stood dead and motionless. The occupants of the carriages could distinguish the conversation of the people on foot. Silent glances were exchanged from window to window; and all ceased talking during this wait, whose silence was broken only by the creaking of a set of harness, or the impatient pawing of a horse's hoof. The blurred voices of the Bois died away in the distance.

All Paris was there, in spite of the lateness of the season: the Duchesse de Sternich, in a chariot; Mme. de Lauwerens, in a smart victoria and pair; the Baronne de Meinhold, in an enchanting light-brown cab; the Comtesse Vanska, with her piebald ponies; Mme. Daste, with her famous black steppers; Mme. de Guende and Mme. Teissière in a brougham; little Sylvia in a dark-blue landau. And then there was Don Carlos, in mourning, with his solemn, old-fashioned liveries; and Selim Pasha, with his fez and without his tutor; the Duchesse de Rozan, in a miniature brougham, with her powdered livery; the

Comte de Chibray, in a dog-cart; Mr. Simpson, driving his perfectly-appointed drag; and the whole American colony. Then, finally, two Academicians in a hired cab.

The front carriages were released, and one by one the whole line began to move slowly on. It resembled an awakening. A thousand lively coruscations sprang up, quick flashes played among the wheels, sparks flew from the horses' harness. On the ground, on the trees, were broad reflections of trotting glass. This glitter of wheels and harness, this blaze of varnished panels glowing with the red gleam of the setting sun, the bright notes of colour cast by the dazzling liveries perched up full against the sky, and by the rich costumes projecting beyond the carriage-doors, were carried along amid a hollow, sustained rumbling sound, timed by the trot of the horses. And the procession went on, with the same noise, the same effects of light, unceasingly and with one impulse, as though the foremost carriages were dragging all the others behind them.

Renée yielded to the first slight jolt of the calash, and lowering her eye-glass, threw herself back on the cushions. Shivering, she drew towards her a corner of the bearskin that filled the body of the carriage as with a sheet of silky snow, and plunged her gloved hands into the long, soft, curly hair. The wind began to blow from the North. The warm October day, which had given the Bois an aftermath of spring and brought the great ladies out in open carriages, threatened to end in a bitterly cold evening.

For a moment Renée remained huddled in the

warmth of her corner, giving way to the pleasurable lullaby of wheels turning before her. Then, raising her head towards Maxime, whose eyes were calmly undressing the women spread out in the adjacent broughams and landaus:

"Tell me," she said, "do you really think that Laure d'Aurigny handsome? How you sang her praises the other day, when they were discussing the sale of her diamonds! . . . By the way, did you not see the necklace and the aigrette your father bought me at the sale?"

"Yes, he does things well," said Maxime, without answering, laughing mischievously. "He finds means to pay Laure's debts and to give diamonds to his wife."

Renée made a slight movement with her shoulders.

"Wretch!" she murmured, with a smile.

But Maxime was leaning forward, following with his gaze a lady whose green dress interested him. Renée had thrown back her head, and with half-closed eyes glanced listlessly at the two sides of the avenue, seeing nothing. On the right, copses and low-cut plantations with reddened leaves and slender branches passed slowly by; at intervals, on the track reserved for riders, slim-waisted gentlemen galloped past, their steeds raising little clouds of fine dust behind them. On the left, at the foot of the narrow grass-plots that run down intersected by flower-beds and shrubs, the lake, clear as crystal, without a ripple, lay as though neatly trimmed along its edges by the gardeners' spades; and on the further side of this translucent

mirror, the two islands, with between them the gray bar formed by the connecting bridge, displayed their smiling slopes and the theatrical outlines of fir-trees and evergreens, whose black foliage, resembling the fringe of curtains cunningly draped along the edge of the horizon, was reflected in the water. This scrap of nature, that seemed like a newly-painted piece of scenery, lay bathed in a faint shadow, in a pale blue vapour which succeeded in lending to the background an exquisite charm, an air of entrancing artificiality. On the other bank, the Châlet des Îles, as though newly varnished, shone like an unused toy; and the paths of yellow sand, the narrow garden walks that wind among the lawns and run along the lake, edged with iron hoops in imitation of rustic woodwork, stood out more curiously, in this last hour of daylight, against the softened green of grass and water.

Accustomed to the ingenious charms of this perspective, Renée, once more yielding to her languor, had lowered her eyelids altogether, and looked only at her slender fingers twisting the long hairs of the bearskin. But there came a jolt in the even trot of the line of carriages. And, raising her head, she nodded to two ladies lolling languidly, amorously, side by side, in a chariot which was noisily leaving the road that skirts the lake, in order to go down one of the side avenues. The Marquise d'Espanet, whose husband, lately an aide-de-camp to the Emperor, had just created a great scandal by allying himself with the discontented members of the old nobility, was one of the most prominent leaders of society of the Second Empire; her companion, Mme. Haffner, was the wife

of a celebrated manufacturer of Colmar, a millionaire twenty times over, whom the Empire was transforming into a politician. Renée, a schoolfellow of the two inseparables, as people nicknamed them with a knowing air, called them by their Christian names, Adeline and Suzanne.

As, after smiling to them, she was about to sink afresh into her corner, a laugh from Maxime made her turn round.

"No, really, I feel too sad: don't laugh, I mean what I say," she said, seeing that the young man was watching her ironically, making merry over her huddled attitude.

Maxime put on a comedy voice:

"How unhappy we are: how jealous!"

She seemed quite amazed.

"I!" she said. "Jealous what of?"

And then added, with a pout of contempt, as though remembering:

"Ah, to be sure, that fat Laure! I had not given her a thought, believe me. If Aristide has, as you say, paid that woman's debts and saved her from having to pack up her trunks, it only proves that he is less fond of money than I thought. This will restore him to the ladies' good graces . . . . The dear man, I leave him every liberty."

She smiled, and pronounced the words "the dear man" in a voice full of friendly indifference. And suddenly, becoming very sad again, casting around her the despairing glance of women who do not know in what form of amusement to take refuge, she murmured:

"Oh, I should like to . . . . But no, I am not jealous, not at all jealous."

She stopped, doubtfully:

"You see, I am bored," she said at last, abruptly.

Then she sat silent, with her lips pressed together. The line of carriages still rolled along the lake with its even trot and a noise singularly resembling a distant water-fall. Now, on the left, there rose, between the water and the roadway, little bushes of evergreens with thin straight stems, forming curious little clusters of pillars. On the right, the copses and plantations had come to an end; the Bois opened out into broad lawns, into vast expanses of grass, with here and there a clump of tall trees; the green-sward ran on, with gentle undulations, to the Porte de la Muette, whose low gates, that seemed like a piece of black lace stretched on the level of the ground, could be distinguished at a very great distance; and on the slopes, at the places where the undulations sank in, the grass seemed quite blue. Renée stared fixedly before her, as though this widening of the horizon, these gentle meadows, soaked in the evening air, had caused her to feel more keenly the void in her existence.

After a pause she repeated, querulously:

"Oh, I am bored, bored to death."

"This is not amusing, you know," said Maxime, calmly. "Your nerves are out of order, undoubtedly."

Renée threw herself back in the carriage.

"Yes, my nerves are out of order," she replied, dryly.

Then she became motherly:

"I am growing old, my dear child; I shall soon be thirty. It's terrible. Nothing gives me pleasure . . . . You, who are twenty, cannot know . . . ."

"Was it to hear your confession that you brought me out?" interrupted the young man. "It would take the devil of a long time."

She received this impertinence with a faint smile, as though it were the outburst of a spoilt child that knows no restraint.

"I should recommend you to complain," continued Maxime. "You spend more than a hundred thousand francs a year on your dress, you live in a sumptuous house, you have splendid horses, your caprices are law, and the papers discuss each of your new gowns as an event of the most serious importance; the women envy you, the men would give ten years of their lives for leave to kiss the tips of your fingers . . . . Is what I say true?"

She nodded affirmatively, without replying. Her eyes cast down, she had resumed her task of curling the hairs of the bearskin.

"Come, don't be modest," Maxime continued; "confess roundly that you are one of the pillars of the Second Empire. We need not hide these things from one another. Wherever you go, at the Tuileries, at the houses of ministers, at the houses of mere millionaires, high or low, you reign a queen. There is not a pleasure of which you have not had your fill, and if I dared, if the respect I owe you did not restrain me, I should say . . . ."

He paused for a few seconds, laughing, then finished his sentence cavalierly:

"I should say you had bitten at every apple."

She moved no muscle.

"And you are bored!" resumed the young man, with droll vivacity. "But it's scandalous! . . . . What is it you want? What on earth do you dream of?"

She shrugged her shoulders to imply that she did not know. Though she kept her head down, Maxime was able to see that she looked so serious, so melancholy, that he thought it best to hold his tongue. He watched the line of carriages, which, when they reached the end of the lake, spread out, filling the whole of the open space. The carriages, packed less closely, swept round with majestic grace; the quicker trot of the horses sounded noisily on the hard ground.

The calash, on going the round to join the line, rocked in a way that filled Maxime with vague enjoyment. Then, yielding to his wish to crush Renée:

"Look here," he said, "you deserve to ride in a cab! That would serve you right! . . . . Why, look at these people returning to Paris, people who are all at your feet. They hail you as their queen, and your sweetheart, M. de Mussy, can hardly refrain from blowing kisses to you."

A horseman was, in fact, bowing to Renée. Maxime had been talking in a hypocritical, mocking voice. But Renée barely turned round, and shrugged her shoulders. At last the young man made a gesture of despair.

"Really," he said; "have we come to that? . . . . But, good God, you have everything: what do you want more?"

Renée raised her head. In her eyes was a glow of light, the ardent desire of unsatisfied curiosity.

"I want something different," she replied, in a low voice.

"But since you have everything," resumed Maxime, laughing, "there is nothing different .... What is the 'something different'?"

"What?" she repeated.

And she did not continue. She had turned right round, and was watching the strange picture fading behind her. It was almost night; twilight was falling slowly like fine ashes. The lake, seen from the front, in the pale daylight that still hovered over the water, became rounder, like a huge tin dish; on either side, the plantations of evergreens, whose slim straight stems seemed to issue from its slumbering surface, assumed at this hour the appearance of purple colonnades, delineating with the evenness of their architecture the studied curves of the shores; and again, in the background, rose shrubberies, confused masses of foliage, whose large black patches closed up the horizon. Behind these patches shone the glow of the expiring sunset, that set fire to but a small portion of the gray immensity. Above this placid lake, these low copses, this singularly flat perspective, stretched the vault of heaven, infinite, deepened and widened. This great slice of sky hanging over this small morsel of nature caused a thrill, an undefinable sadness; and from these paling heights fell so deep an autumnal melancholy, so sweet and so heart-breaking a darkness, that the Bois, wound little by little in a shadowy shroud, lost its mundane

graces, widened, full of the puissant charm that forests have. The trot of the carriages, whose bright colouring was swept away in the twilight, sounded like the distant voices of leaves and running water. All died away as it went. In the centre of the lake, in the general evanescence, the lateen sail of the great pleasure-boat stood out, strongly defined against the glow of the sunset. And it was no longer possible to distinguish anything but this sail, this triangle of yellow canvas, immeasurably enlarged.

Renée, satiated as she was, experienced a singular sensation of illicit desire at the sight of this landscape that had become unrecognizable, of this bit of nature, so worldly and artificial, which the great vibrating darkness transformed into a sacred grove, one of the ideal glades in whose recesses the gods of old concealed their Titanic loves, their adulteries, and their divine incests. And, as the calash drove away, it seemed to her that the twilight was carrying off behind her, in its tremulous veil, the land of her dream, the flagitious, celestial alcove in which her sick heart and weary flesh might at last have been assuaged.

When, fading into the shadow, the lake and the bushes showed only as a black bar against the sky, Renée turned round abruptly, and, in a voice that contained tears of vexation, resumed her interrupted phrase:

"What? . . . . something different, of course; I want something different. How do I know what! If I did know . . . . But, look here, I am sick of balls, sick of suppers, sick of that sort of entertainment. It is so monotonous. It is deadly . . . .

And the men are insufferable, ah! yes, insufferable."

Maxime began to laugh. A certain eagerness became apparent under the aristocratic aspect of the woman of fashion. She no longer blinked her eyelids, the wrinkle on her forehead became more harshly accentuated; her lip, that was so like a sulky child's, protruded in hot quest of the nameless enjoyments she pined for. She observed her companion's laughter, but was too excited to stop; lying back, swayed by the rocking of the carriage, she continued in short, sharp sentences:

"Yes, certainly, you are insufferable . . . . I don't include you, Maxime, you are too young . . . . But if I were to tell you how ponderous Aristide used to be in the early days! And the others! the men who have been my lovers . . . . You know, we are good friends, you and I: I don't mind what I say to you; well then, there are really days when I am so tired of living this life of a rich woman, adored and worshipped, that I feel I should like to become a Laure d'Aurigny, one of those ladies who live like bachelors."

And on Maxime laughing still lower, she insisted:

"Yes, a Laure d'Aurigny. It would surely be less insipid, less monotonous."

She sat silent for a few minutes, as though picturing to herself the life she would lead if she were Laure. Then, with a note of discouragement in her voice:

"After all," she resumed, "those women must have their own annoyances too. There is nothing amusing in life. It is killing work . . . . As I said,

one ought to have something different; you understand, I can't guess what; but something else, something that would happen to nobody but one's self, that would not be met with every day, that would give a rare, unknown enjoyment . . . . "

She spoke more slowly. She uttered these last words as though seeking something, giving way to absent reverie. The calash went up the avenue that leads to the entrance of the Bois. The darkness increased; the copses ran along on either side like gray walls; the yellow iron chairs upon which, on fine evenings, the middle-class loves to attitudinize in its Sunday best, filed away along the footways, all unoccupied, with the gloomy melancholy air common to garden furniture overtaken by the winter; and the rumbling, the dull rhythmical noise of the returning carriages passed down the deserted avenues like a sad refrain.

Maxime doubtless appreciated the bad form of thinking life amusing. Though young enough to give himself over to an outburst of contented admiration, his egoism was too great, his indifference too cynical, he already experienced too much real weariness, not to proclaim himself disgusted, sick, and played-out. And, as a rule, he took a certain pride in making the confession.

He threw himself back like Renée, and assumed a plaintive voice.

"Yes, you are right," he said; "it is killing work. As for that, I amuse myself no more than you do; I too have often dreamt of something different . . . . There is nothing so stupid as travel-

ling. Making money: I prefer to run through it, though even that is not always so amusing as one at first imagines. Loving and being loved: we soon get sick of that, don't we? . . . . Yes, we get sick of it!"

Renée made no reply, and he went on, desiring to astound her with a piece of gross blasphemy:

"I should like to have a nun in love with me. Eh? that might be amusing . . . . Have you never dreamt of loving a man of whom you would not be able even to think without committing a crime?"

But her gloom continued, and Maxime, seeing that she remained silent, concluded that she was not listening. She seemed to be sleeping with her eyes open, the nape of her neck resting against the padded edge of the calash. She lay listlessly thinking, a prey to the dreams that kept her depressed, and at times a slight nervous movement passed over her lips. She was softly overcome by the shadow of the twilight; all that this shadow contained of sadness, of discreet pleasures, of hopes unacknowledged, penetrated her, covered her with an air of morbid languor. Doubtless, while staring at the round back of the footman on his box, she was thinking of those delights of yesterday, of those entertainments that had so palled upon her, that she was weary of; she contemplated her past life, the instantaneous satisfaction of her appetites, the fulsomeness of luxury, the appalling monotony of the same loves and the same betrayals. Then, with a ray of hope, there came to her, with shivers of longing, the idea of that "something different" which her mind could not

strain itself to fix upon. There, her dream wandered. Constantly the word that she strove to find escaped into the falling night, became lost in the continuous rolling of the carriages. The soft vibration of the calash was an impediment the more that prevented her from formulating her desire. And an immense temptation rose from the empty space, from the copses asleep in the shadow on either side of the avenue, from the noise of wheels and from the gentle oscillation that filled her with a delicious torpor. A thousand tremulous emotions passed over her flesh: dreams unrealized, nameless delights, confused longings, all the monstrous voluptuousness that a drive home from the Bois under a paling sky can infuse into a woman's worn heart. She kept both her hands buried in the bearskin, she was quite warm in her white cloth coat with the mauve velvet facings. She put out her foot, as she stretched herself in her feeling of well-being, and with her ankle lightly touched Maxime's warm leg; he took no notice of this contact. A jolt aroused her from her lethargy. She raised her head and with her gray eyes looked strangely at the young man, who sat lounging in an attitude of sheer elegance.

At this moment the calash left the Bois. The Avenue de l'Impératrice stretched out straight into the darkness, with the two green lines of its fences of painted wood, which met at the horizon. In the side-path reserved for riders, a white horse in the distance cut out a bright patch in the gray horizon. Here and there, on the other side, along the roadway, were belated pedestrians, groups of black spots, making

slowly for Paris. And right up above, at the end of the rumbling, confused procession of carriages, the Arc de Triomphe, seen from one side, displayed its whiteness against a vast expanse of sooty sky.

While the calash ascended at an increased pace, Maxime, charmed with the English appearance of the scene, looked out at the irregular architecture of the private houses on both sides of the avenue, with their lawns running down to the side-walks. Renée, still dreaming, amused herself by watching the gaslights of the Place de l'Étoile being lit, one by one, on the edge of the horizon, and as each of these bright jets splashed the dying day with its little yellow flame, she seemed to hear a mysterious appeal; it seemed to her that Paris flaring in its winter's night was being lighted up for her, and making ready for her the unknown gratification that her glutted senses yearned for.

The calash turned down the Avenue de la Reine-Hortense, and pulled up at the end of the Rue Monceau, a few steps from the Boulevard Malesherbes, in front of a large private house standing between a court-yard and a garden. The two gates, heavily ornamented with gilt enrichments, which opened into the court-yard were flanked by a pair of lamps, shaped like urns, and similarly covered with gilding, in which flared broad gas-jets. Between the two gates, the concierge lived in a pretty lodge vaguely suggestive of a little Greek temple.

Maxime sprang lightly to the ground as the carriage was about to enter the court-yard.

"You know," said Renée, detaining him by the hand, "we dine at half-past seven. You have more than an hour to dress in. Don't keep us waiting."

And she added, with a smile:

"The Mareuils are coming. . . . Your father wishes you to pay Louise every attention."

Maxime shrugged his shoulders.

"What a bore!" he murmured, peevishly. "I don't mind marrying, but wooing is too silly. . . . Ah! how nice it would be of you, Renée, if you would rescue me from Louise this evening."

He put on his comedy look, the accent and grimace which he borrowed from Lassouche whenever he was about to launch one of his constant conceits:

"Will you, stepmother dear?"

Renée shook hands with him in masculine fashion. And quickly, with nervous, jesting boldness:

"If I had not married your father, I believe you would have made love to me."

The young man appeared to think the idea very funny, for he was still laughing when he turned the corner of the Boulevard Malesherbes.

The calash entered and drew up before the steps.

These steps, which were broad and shallow, were sheltered by a great glass awning, with a scalloped bordering of golden fringe and tassels. The two stories of the house rose up above the servants' offices, whose square windows, glazed with frosted glass, appeared just above the level of the ground. At the top of the steps the hall-door projected, flanked by slender columns recessed into the wall,

thus forming a slight break, marked at each story by a bay-window, and ascending to the roof, where it finished in a pediment. The stories had five windows on each side, placed at regular intervals along the façade, and simply framed in stone. The roof was cut off square above the attic windows, with broad and almost perpendicular sides.

But on the garden side the façade was far more sumptuous. A regal flight of steps led to a narrow terrace which skirted the whole length of the ground-floor; the balustrade of this terrace, designed to match the railings of the Parc Monceau, was even more heavily gilded than the awning or the lamps in the court-yard. Above this rose the mansion, having at either corner a pavilion, a sort of tower half enclosed in the body of the building, and containing rooms of a circular form. In the centre there bulged out slightly a third turret, more deeply contained in the building. The windows, tall and narrow in the turrets, wider apart and almost square on the flat portions of the façade, had on the ground-floor stone balustrades and on the upper stories gilded wrought-iron railings. The display of decoration was profuse to oppressiveness. The house was hidden under its sculpture. Around the windows and along the cornices ran swags of flowers and branches; there were balconies shaped like baskets full of blossoms, and supported by great naked women with straining hips, with breasts jutting out before them; then, here and there, were planted fanciful escutcheons, clusters of fruit, roses, every flower that it is possible for stone or marble to represent. The higher the eye ascended,

the more the building burst into blossom. Around the roof ran a balustrade on which stood, at equal intervals, urns blazing with flames of stone. And there, between the bull's-eye windows of the attics, which opened on to an incredible confusion of fruit and foliage, mantled the crowning portions of this stupendous scheme of decoration, the pediments of the turrets, amid which reappeared the great naked women, playing with apples, attitudinizing amidst sheaves of rushes. The roof, loaded with these ornaments, and surmounted besides with a cresting of embossed lead, with two lightning conductors, and with four huge symmetrical chimney-stacks, carved like all the rest, seemed the supreme effort of this architectural firework.

On the right was a vast conservatory, built on to the side of the house, and communicating with the ground-floor through the glass door of a drawing-room. The garden, separated from the Parc Monceau by a low railing concealed by a hedge, had a considerable slope. Too small for the house, so narrow that a grass-plot and a few clumps of evergreens filled it up entirely, it was there simply as a mound, a green pedestal on which the house stood proudly planted in its gala dress. Seen from the gardens, across the well-trimmed grass and the glistening foliage of the shrubs, this great structure, still new and absolutely pallid, showed the wan face, the purse-proud, foolish importance of a female parvenu, with its heavy head-dress of slates, its gilded flounces, and the rustling of its sculptured skirts. It was a reduced copy of the new Louvre, one of the most charac-

teristic specimens of the Napoleon III style, that fecund bastard of every style. On summer evenings, when the rays of the setting sun lit up the gilt of the railings against its white façade, the strollers in the gardens would stop to look at the crimson silk curtains draped behind the ground-floor windows; and, through sheets of plate glass so wide and so clear that they seemed like the window-fronts of a big modern shop, arranged so as to display to the outer world the wealth within, the small middle-class could catch glimpses of the corners of chairs or tables, of portions of hangings, of patches of ceilings of a profuse richness, the sight of which would root them to the spot with envy and admiration, right in the middle of the pathways.

But at this moment the shades were falling from the trees, and the façade slept. On the other side, in the court-yard, the footman was respectfully assisting Renée to alight. At the further end of a glass covered-way on the right, the stables, banded with red brick, opened wide their doors of polished oak. On the left, as if for a balance, there was built into the wall of the adjacent house a highly-decorated niche, within which a sheet of water flowed unceasingly from a shell which two Cupids held in their outstretched arms. Renée stood for a moment at the foot of the steps, gently tapping her dress, which refused to fall properly. The court-yard, which had just been traversed by the noise of the equipage, resumed its solitude, its high-bred silence, broken by the continuous song of the flowing water. And as yet, in the black mass made by the house

where the first of the great autumn dinner-parties was presently to cause light to be set to the chandeliers, the bottom windows alone shed their light, all glowing and casting the bright reflections of a conflagration upon the little pavement of the court-yard, neat and regular as a draught-board.

Renée pushed open the hall-door, and found herself face to face with her husband's valet, who was on his way to the basement, carrying a silver kettle. The man looked magnificent, dressed all in black, tall, broad-shouldered, pale-complexioned, with the conventional side-whiskers of an English diplomat, and the solemn and dignified air of a magistrate.

"Baptiste," asked Renée, "has monsieur come in?"

"Yes, madame, he is dressing," replied the valet, with a bend of the head which a prince bowing to the crowd might have envied.

Renée slowly climbed the staircase, drawing off her gloves.

The hall was very luxurious. There was a slight sense of suffocation on entering. The thick carpets that covered the floor and the stairs, the broad red velvet hangings that concealed the walls and the doorways, made the air heavy with silence, with the tepid fragrance of a chapel. Draperies hung high, and the very lofty ceiling was decorated with bosses projecting from a trellis-work of golden ribs. The staircase, whose double balustrade of white marble had a hand-rail covered with crimson velvet, commenced in two slightly converging flights, between which, at the

back, was placed the door of the big drawing-room. On the first landing an immense mirror filled the whole wall. Below, at the foot of the branching staircase, stood, on marble pedestals, two bronze-gilt women, bare to the waist, upholding great lamps set with five burners, whose bright light was softened by ground-glass globes. And on both sides was a row of admirable majolica vases, in which rare plants displayed their growth.

Renée climbed the staircase, and at each step her image rose in the glass; she wondered, with the feeling of doubt common to the most popular actresses, whether she was really delicious, as people told her.

Then, when she had reached her rooms, which were on the first floor and overlooked the Parc Monceau, she rang for Céleste, her maid, and had herself dressed for dinner. This took fully an hour and a quarter. When the last pin had been inserted, she opened a window, as the room was very warm, and, leaning her elbows on the sill, sat thinking. Behind her, Céleste moved about discreetly, putting away the things.

A sea of shadow filled the gardens below. The tall, inky masses of foliage, shaken by sudden gusts of wind, swayed heavily to and fro as with the flux and reflux of the tide, the sound of their dead leaves recalling the lapping of waves on a pebbly beach. Only now and then this ebb and flow of darkness would be pierced by the two yellow eyes of a carriage, appearing and disappearing between the shrubberies, along the road connecting the Avenue de la Reine-

Hortense with the Boulevard Malesherbes. In the presence of this autumnal melancholy, Renée felt her heart once more fill with sadness. She fancied herself a child in her father's house, in that still house in the Île Saint Louis, where for two centuries the Bérauds du Châtel had sheltered their grim, magisterial gravity. Then she thought of the suddenness of her marriage, of that widower who had sold himself to become her husband and bartered his name of Rougon for that of Saccard, the two dry syllables of which, when she first heard them, had sounded in her ears with the brutal cadence of two rakes gathering up gold; he took her and cast her into this life of excess, in which her poor head was becoming more and more disordered every day. Then she fell to dreaming, with childlike joy, of the pleasant games of battledore she had played with her little sister Christine in the old days. And how some morning she would wake from her dream of enjoyment of the past ten years, mad, soiled by one of her husband's speculations, in which he himself would go under. It came to her as a quick foreboding. The trees soughed more loudly. Renée, distressed by these thoughts of shame and punishment, yielded to the instincts, slumbering within her, of the honest old middle-class; she made a promise to the black night that she would reform, spend less on her dress, seek some innocent amusement, as in the happy school-days, when the girls sang "Nous n'irons plus aux bois," as they danced sweetly under the plane-trees.

At this moment, Céleste, who had been downstairs, returned, and murmured in her mistress's ear ·

"Monsieur begs madame to go down. There are several people already in the drawing-room."

Renée shivered. She had not noticed the keen air that had frozen her shoulders. As she passed before her mirror, she stopped, glanced at herself automatically. She smiled involuntarily, and went downstairs.

Most of the guests had, in fact, arrived. She found downstairs her sister Christine, a young girl of twenty, very simply dressed in white muslin; her aunt Élisabeth, the widow of Aubertot the notary, in black satin, a little old woman of sixty, of an exquisite charm of manner; her husband's sister, Sidonie Rougon, a lean, mealy-mouthed woman, of uncertain age, with a face like soft wax, which the dull hue of her dress threw even more in the shade; then the Mareuils; the father, M. de Mareuil, who had just left off mourning for his wife, a tall, handsome man, shallow and serious, bearing a striking resemblance to the valet Baptiste; and the daughter, that poor Louise, as she was called, a child of seventeen, puny, a little hump-backed, wearing with a sickly grace a white foulard dress with red spots; then a whole group of serious men, men with many decorations, official gentlemen with silent, sallow faces, and, further on, another group, young men these, with vicious looks and low-cut waistcoats, standing round five or six ladies of extreme elegance, foremost among whom were the two inseparables, the little Marquise d'Espanet, in yellow, and the fair-haired Mme. Haffner, in violet. M. de Mussy, the horseman whose bow Renée had not acknowledged, was there too, with the

restless look of a lover who feels his dismissal coming. And, among the long trains spread over the carpet, two contractors, two bricklayers who had made money, Mignon and Charrier, with whom Saccard was to settle a matter of business on the morrow, moved about heavily in their clumsy boots, their hands behind their backs, wretchedly unhappy in their dress-clothes.

Aristide Saccard, standing by the door, managed to greet each new arrival while holding forth to the group of serious men with his Southern twang and sprightliness. He shook his guests by the hand, with a cordial word of welcome. Short, mean in appearance, he bent and bowed like a puppet; and the most salient feature of all his shrill, cunning, swarthy little person was the red splash of the ribbon of the Legion of Honour, which he wore very wide.

Renée's entrance provoked a murmur of admiration. She was really divine. Upon a tulle skirt, garnished behind with a flow of flounces, she wore a body of pale-green satin, bordered with English lace, caught up and fastened with large bunches of violets; a single flounce adorned the front of the skirt, and bunches of violets, held together by garlands of ivy, fastened a light muslin drapery. Her head and bust appeared adorably gracious above these petticoats of regal fulness and richness overloaded. Her neck was uncovered down to the points of her breasts, her arms were bare and had clusters of violets at the shoulders: she seemed to emerge quite naked from her case of tulle and satin, similarly to one of those nymphs whose busts issue from the sacred oaks. Her white neck and

shoulders, her supple body, seemed so happy already in their semi-freedom, that the eye expected every moment to see the bodice and skirts glide down, like the dress of a bather enraptured with her flesh. Her fine yellow hair, gathered up high, helmet-shaped, with trailing through it a sprig of ivy retained by a knot of violets, still further accentuated her nudity by uncovering the nape of her neck, which was lightly shaded by little wanton curls, like threads of gold. Round her throat was a necklace with pendants, of brilliants of wonderful water, and on her forehead an aigrette made of sprigs of silver set with diamonds. And so she stood for some seconds on the threshold, erect in the magnificence of her dress, her shoulders shimmering in the hot light like watered silk. She had come down quickly, and was a little out of breath. Her eyes, which the blackness of the Parc Monceau had filled with shadow, blinked in that quick flood of light, giving her that air of hesitation of the short-sighted which in her was so gracious.

On perceiving her, the little marquise sprang from her seat, came running up to her, took her by both hands, and examining her from head to foot, murmured in fluted tones:

"You dear, beautiful creature . . . . "

Meanwhile there was much moving about; all the guests came and did homage to the beautiful Mme. Saccard, as Renée was known to everyone in society. She touched hands with most of the men. Then she kissed Christine, and asked after her father, who never came to the house in the Parc Monceau. And smiling, still bowing, her arms languidly rounded,

she remained standing before the circle of ladies, who examined anxiously the necklace and the aigrette.

The fair-haired Mme. Haffner could no longer withstand the temptation. She drew nearer, and after a wistful look at the gems, asked, with envy in her voice:

"That is the necklace and aigrette, is it not?"

Renée nodded. Thereupon all the women burst out into praise; the jewels were delicious, divine; then they proceeded to discuss, with admiration full of envy, Laure d'Aurigny's sale, at which Saccard had bought them for his wife; they complained that those creatures got the prettiest of everything: soon there would be no diamonds left for the honest women. And through their complaints there filtered the longing to feel on their bare skins some of the jewellery that all Paris had seen on the shoulders of a noted courtesan, that might perhaps whisper in their ears scandals of the alcoves in which the thoughts of these great ladies so gladly lingered. They knew of the high prices, they mentioned a gorgeous cashmere shawl, some magnificent lace. The aigrette had cost fifteen thousand francs, the necklace fifty thousand. These figures roused Mme. d'Espanet to enthusiasm. She called Saccard over, exclaiming:

"Come and let me congratulate you! What a good husband you are!"

Aristide Saccard came up, bowed, made little of it. But his grinning features betrayed a lively satisfaction. And he watched from the corner of his eye the two contractors, the two bricklayers who had made their fortunes, as they stood a few steps off,

listening with evident respect to the sound of such figures as fifteen and fifty thousand francs.

At this moment Maxime, who had just come in, charmingly pinched in his dress-clothes, leant familiarly on his father's shoulder, and whispered to him as to a schoolfellow, glancing towards the bricklayers. Saccard wore the discreet smile of an actor called before the curtain.

Some more guests arrived. There were at least thirty persons in the drawing-room. Conversation was resumed; in intervals of silence the faint clatter of silver and crockery was heard through the walls. At last Baptiste opened the folding-doors, and majestically pronounced the sacramental phrase:

"Dinner is served, madame."

Then, slowly, the procession formed. Saccard gave his arm to the little marquise; Renée took the arm of an old gentleman, a senator, the Baron Gouraud, before whom everybody bowed down with great humility; as to Maxime, he was obliged to offer his arm to Louise de Mareuil; then followed the rest of the guests, in double file; and right at the end, the two contractors, swinging their arms.

The dining-room was a huge, square room, whose wainscotting of stained and varnished pear-wood rose to the height of a man, and was decorated with slender beadings of gold. The four large panels had evidently been prepared so that they might be filled up with paintings of still life; but this had never been done, the landlord having doubtless recoiled before a purely artistic expenditure. They had been hung simply with dark-green velvet. The chairs, curtains, and

door-hangings of the same material gave the room a look of sober seriousness, calculated to concentrate on the table all the splendour of the light.

And indeed, at this hour, the table, standing in the centre of the wide, dark Persian carpet, which deadened the sound of the footsteps, and under the glaring light of the chandelier, surrounded by chairs whose black backs, with fillets of gold, encircled it with a dark frame, seemed like an altar, like a mortuary chapel, as the bright scintillations of the crystal glass and silver plate sparkled on the dazzling whiteness of the cloth. Beyond the carved chair-backs, one could just perceive, in a floating shadow, the wainscotting of the walls, a large low sideboard, ends of velvet hanging here and there. The eye was of necessity drawn back to the table, and became filled with the splendour of it. A beautiful dead-silver centre-piece, glittering with its chased work, stood in the middle of the table; it represented a troop of satyrs carrying off nymphs; above the group, issuing from a large cornucopia, an enormous bouquet of real flowers hung down in clusters. At either end of the table stood vases with more flowers, a pair of candelabra, matching the centre group, and each consisting of a satyr running off with a swooning woman on one arm, and holding in the other a ten-branched candlestick which added the brilliancy of its candles to the lustre of the central chandelier. Between these principal ornaments the first dishes, large and small, were ranged symmetrically, flanked by shells containing the hors d'œuvre, and separated by porcelain bowls, crystal vases, flat plates and tall preserve-

stands, filled with that portion of the dessert that was already on the table. Along the line of plates ran an army of glasses, of water-bottles, of decanters, of salt-cellars, and all this glass was as thin and light as muslin, uncut, and so transparent that it cast no shadow. And the centre-piece and candelabra seemed like fountains of fire; sparks glittered in the burnished silver dishes; the forks, the spoons, and the knives with handles of mother-of-pearl were as bars of flame; colours kaleidoscopic filled the glasses; and, in the midst of this rain of light, of this mass of incandescence, the decanters threw red stains upon the white-hot cloth.

On entering, a discreet expression of felicity overspread the faces of the men, as they smiled to the ladies on their arms. The flowers imparted a freshness to the heavy atmosphere. Delicately the fumes of cooked food mingled with the perfume of the roses. The sharp odour of prawns predominated, and the sour scent of citrons.

Then, when each had found his name written on the back of his menu-card, there was a noise of chairs, a great rustling of silken dresses. The bare shoulders, studded with diamonds, separated by black coats, which served to throw up their pallor, added their creamy whiteness to the gleam of the table. The dinner began amidst little smiles exchanged between neighbours, in a semi-silence only broken as yet by the muffled clattering of spoons. Baptiste fulfilled his office of major-domo with his serious diplomatic attitudes; under his orders were, in addition to the two footmen, four assistants whom he only engaged

for the great dinners. As he removed each dish to the end of the room and carved it at a side-table, three of the servants passed noiselessly round the table, dish in hand, naming the contents in an undertone as they handed them. The others served the wine, and saw to the bread and the decanters. The removes and entrées thus slowly went round and disappeared; the ladies' pearly laughter grew no shriller.

The guests were too many for the conversation easily to become general. Nevertheless, at the second course, when the game and side-dishes had replaced the removes and entrées, and the generous wines of Burgundy, Pomard and Chambertin, succeeded the Léoville and Château-Lafitte, the sound of voices increased, and bursts of laughter caused the light glass to ring again. Renée, seated at the middle of the table, had on her right the Baron Gouraud, and on her left M. Toutin-Laroche, a retired candle-manufacturer, and now a Municipal Councillor, a director of the Crédit Viticole, and a member of the committee of inspection of the Société Générale of the Ports of Morocco, a lean, important person, whom Saccard, sitting opposite between Mme. d'Espanet and Mme. Haffner, addressed at one moment, in unctuous tones, as "My dear colleague," and at another as "Our great administrator." Next came the politicians: M. Hupel de la Noue, a provincial préfet, who spent eight months of the year in Paris; three deputies, among whom M. Haffner displayed his broad Alsatian face; then M. de Saffré, a charming young man, secretary to one of the ministers; and M. Michelin, the First Commissioner of Roads.

M. de Mareuil, a perpetual candidate for the Chamber of Deputies, sat square, facing the préfet, whom he ogled persistently. As to M. d'Espanet, he never accompanied his wife into society. The ladies of the family were placed between the most prominent of these personages. Saccard had, however, kept his sister Sidonie, whom he had placed further off, for the seat between the two contractors, the Sieur Charrier on her right, the Sieur Mignon on her left, as being a post of trust where it was a question of conquest. Mme. Michelin, the wife of the First Commissioner, a plump, pretty, dark woman, sat next to M. de Saffré, with whom she carried on an animated conversation in a low voice. And at either end of the table were the young people, auditors to the Council of State, sons of useful fathers, budding millionaires, M. de Mussy, casting despairing glances at Renée, and Maxime, apparently quite vanquished by Louise de Mareuil, who sat on his right. Little by little they had begun to laugh very loudly. It was from their corner that the first outbursts of gaiety proceeded.

Meanwhile M. Hupel de la Noue enquired courteously:

"Shall we have the pleasure of seeing his Excellency this evening?"

"I fear not," answered Saccard with an air of importance that concealed a secret annoyance. "My brother is so busy . . . . He has sent us his secretary, M. de Saffré, to make his apologies to us."

The young secretary, whom Mme. Michelin was decidedly monopolizing, raised his head on hearing

his name mentioned, and cried at random, thinking that he had been spoken to:

"Yes, yes, there is to be a cabinet council this evening at nine o'clock at the office of the Keeper of the Seals."

All this time, M. Toutin-Laroche, who had been interrupted, was continuing seriously, as though he were delivering a peroration amid the attentive silence of the Municipal Council:

"The results are superb. This city loan will be remembered as one of the finest financial operations of the period. Ah! messieurs . . . ."

But at this point his voice was again drowned in the laughter that broke out suddenly at one end of the table. In the midst of this outburst of merriment could be heard Maxime's voice, as he concluded an anecdote: "But wait, I have not finished. The fair equestrian was picked up by a road-labourer. They say she is having him brilliantly educated with a view to marrying him later on. No man but her husband, she says, shall boast of having seen a certain black mole just above her knee." The laughter redoubled; Louise laughed unreservedly, louder than the men. And noiselessly amid this laughter, as though deaf, a footman at this moment thrust his pale serious face between each guest, offering in a low voice slices of wild duck.

Aristide was annoyed at the want of attention paid to M. Toutin-Laroche. He repeated, to show that he had been listening:

"The city loan . . . ."

But M. Toutin-Laroche was not the man to lose the thread of an idea:

"Ah! messieurs," he continued when the laughter had subsided, "yesterday was a great consolation to us whose administration is exposed to such base attacks. They accuse the council of leading the city to destruction, and you see, no sooner does the city issue a loan, than they all bring us their money, even those who complain."

"You have performed wonders," said Saccard. "Paris has become the capital of the world."

"Yes, it is really astounding," interposed M. Hupel de la Noue. "Can you imagine that I, old Parisian that I am, no longer know my Paris. I lost my way yesterday in going from the Hôtel de Ville to the Luxembourg. It's astounding, astounding!"

There was a pause. All the serious people were now listening.

"The transformation of Paris," continued M. Toutin-Laroche, "will be the glory of the reign. The nation is ungrateful; it ought to kiss the Emperor's feet. As I said this morning in the council, when they were talking of the great success of the loan: 'Gentlemen, let those brawlers of the opposition say what they will; to plough up Paris is to make it productive.'"

Saccard smiled, and closed his eyes, as though the better to relish the subtlety of the epigram. He leant behind the back of Mme. d'Espanet, and said to M. Hupel de la Noue, loud enough to be heard:

"He is adorably witty."

Meantime, while they were discussing the alterations being made in Paris, the Sieur Charrier had been stretching out his neck, as though to take part in the

conversation. His partner Mignon was fully occupied with Mme. Sidonie, who was giving him plenty to do. Saccard had been watching the two contractors from the corner of his eye since the commencement of dinner.

"The administration," he said, "has met with so much devotion. Everyone was eager to contribute to the great work. Without the wealthy companies that came to its assistance, the city would never have done so well nor so quickly."

He turned round, and with a sort of fawning brutality:

"MM. Mignon and Charrier know something of that; they have had their share of the labour, and they will have their share of the glory."

The bricklayers who had made their fortunes received this uncouth compliment with radiant faces. Mignon, to whom Mme. Sidonie was saying, in her mincing tones: "Ah, monsieur, you flatter me; no, pink would be too young for me . . . ." left her in the middle of her sentence to reply to Saccard:

"You are too kind; we merely did our business."

But Charrier was more polished. He drank off his glass of Pomard, and managed to deliver himself of a phrase:

"The alterations of Paris," he said, "have given a living to the workman."

"And we may add," resumed M. Toutin-Laroche, "that they have given a magnificent impulse to industry and finance."

"And do not forget the artistic side of the question: the new thoroughfares are majestic in

their beauty," added M. Hupel de la Noue, who prided himself on his taste.

"Yes, yes, it is a fine undertaking," murmured M. de Mareuil, for the sake of saying something.

"As to the cost," declared Haffner seriously, the deputy who never opened his mouth except on great occasions, "that will be for our children to bear, nothing could be fairer."

And as, in speaking, he looked towards M. de Saffré, who appeared to have given a momentary offence to the pretty Mme. Michelin, the young secretary, to shew that he had been following the conversation, repeated:

"Nothing could be fairer indeed."

Each member of the group of serious men at the middle of the table had had his say. M. Michelin, the Chief Commissioner, smiled and wagged his head: this was his ordinary method of taking part in a conversation: he had smiles of greeting, of response, of approval, of thanks, of leave-taking, quite a pretty collection of smiles which saved him almost any necessity for speech, an arrangement which he looked upon as doubtless more polite and more favourable to his advancement.

Yet one other personage had kept silence, the Baron Gouraud, who munched his food slowly like a drowsy ox. Up to that moment he had appeared absorbed in the contemplation of his plate. Renée, who paid him every attention, received nothing for it but little grunts of satisfaction. And consequently it was a surprise to see him lift his head and observe, as he wiped his greasy lips:

"As a landlord, whenever I have a flat done up and painted, I raise the rent."

M. Haffner's expression: "The cost will be for our children to bear" had had the effect of arousing the senator. All discreetly clapped their hands, and M. de Saffré exclaimed:

"Ah, charming, charming, I must send that to the papers to-morrow."

"You are quite right, messieurs, these are good times we live in," said Mignon, by way of summing up, in the midst of the smiles and admiration aroused by the baron's epigram. "I know a few who have made a good thing out of them. You see, everything is fine so long as you make money by it."

These last words seemed to freeze the serious men. The conversation dropped flat, and each appeared to avoid his neighbour's eyes. The bricklayer's aphorism struck home, deadly as the paving-stone of la Fontaine's bear. Michelin, who happened to be beaming upon Saccard with a pleasant air, ceased smiling, very anxious lest he should seem for one instant to have applied the contractor's words to the master of the house. The latter threw a glance to Mme. Sidonie, who tackled Mignon afresh, saying, "And so you like pink, monsieur . . . ?" And Saccard paid an elaborate compliment to Mme. Espanet; his dark, sorry face almost touched her milky shoulders, as she threw herself back and tittered.

They were at the dessert. The lackeys moved round the table at a quicker pace. There was a pause while the cloth was being covered with the remainder of the fruit and sweets. At Maxime's end of the

table the laughter increased in brightness; Louise's little shrill voice was heard saying: "I assure you, Sylvia wore blue satin as Dindonette;" and another childish voice added: "Yes, but her dress was trimmed with white lace." Tepid fumes pervaded the air. The flushed faces seemed to be softened by a sense of inward felicity. Two lackeys went round the table serving Alicante and Tokay.

Renée had worn a look of vacancy ever since the beginning of dinner. She fulfilled her duties as hostess with a mechanical smile. At every outburst of merriment that came from the end of the table where Maxime and Louise sat side by side, jesting like boon companions, she threw a lurid glance in their direction. She felt bored. The serious men were too much for her. Mme. d'Espanet and Mme. Haffner looked towards her in despair.

"And what are the prospects of the forthcoming elections?" asked Saccard, suddenly, of M. Hupel de la Noue.

"Very promising," answered the latter, smiling: "only I have had no candidates appointed as yet for my department. The minister has not made up his mind, it would seem."

M. de Mareuil, who had thanked Saccard with a glance for broaching this subject, appeared to be on hot coals. He blushed, and bowed disconcertedly when the préfet turned to him and continued:

"I have heard much of you in the country, monsieur. Your extensive property there has won you many friends, and your devotion to the Emperor is well known. Your chances are excellent."

"Papa, isn't it true that little Sylvia used to sell cigarettes at Marseilles in 1849?" cried Maxime at this moment from the end of the table.

Aristide Saccard pretended not to hear, and his son continued in a lower tone:

"My father has known her intimately."

This aroused some smothered laughter. Meantime, while M. de Mareuil kept up his bowing, M. Haffner had resumed in sententious tones:

"Devotion to the Emperor is the only virtue, the only patriotism, in these days of self-interested democracy. Who loves the Emperor loves France. It would give us unfeigned pleasure if monsieur were to become our colleague."

"Monsieur will succeed," said M. Toutin-Laroche in his turn. "All large fortunes should gather round the throne."

Renée could bear it no longer. The marquise was stifling a yawn in front of her. And as Saccard was about to resume, she said to him, with her pretty smile:

"Take pity on us, dear, and spare us any more of your horrid politics."

Then M. Hupel de la Noue, with a préfet's gallantry, exclaimed that the ladies were right. And he began to tell an indecent story of something that had happened in his district. The marquise, Mme. Haffner, and the other ladies, laughed heartily at certain of the details. The préfet told his story in a very pungent style, with suggestions, reservations and inflections of voice that gave a very improper meaning to the most inoffensive expressions. Then

they talked of the first of the duchesse's Tuesdays, of a burlesque that had been produced the night before, of the death of a poet, and of the end of the autumn racing-season. M. Toutin-Laroche, who had his amiable moments, drew a comparison between women and roses, and M. de Mareuil, in the confusion in which he had been plunged by his electoral expectations, gave vent to profound observations on the new fashion in bonnets. Renée retained her vacant look.

Meanwhile the guests had ceased eating. A hot breath seemed to have passed over the table, clouding the glasses, crumbling the bread, blackening the fruit-peel on the plates, and destroying the fine symmetry of the cloth. The flowers drooped in the great cornucopia of chased silver. And the guests had a moment of self-oblivion, in the presence of the remains of the dessert, lacking the energy to rise from their seats. Leaning half forward, with one arm resting on the table, they had the listless aspect, the indefinite dejection, that accompanies the cautious, circumspect inebriation of men and women of fashion fuddling themselves by degrees. All laughter had subsided, and but few words were spoken. Much had been drunk and eaten, and the group of men with decorations were more solemn than ever. In the heavy atmosphere of the room, the ladies felt a dampness rising to their necks and temples. They awaited the signal to adjourn to the drawing-room, serious, a little pale, as though their heads were gently swimming. Mme. Espanet was pink all over, while Mme. Haffner's shoulders had assumed

a waxen whiteness. And M. Hupel de la Noue examined the handle of his knife; M. Toutin-Laroche continued to fling disconnected sentences towards M. Haffner, who wagged his head in reply; M. de Mareuil mused, with his eyes fixed on M. de Michelin, who smiled upon him archly. As for the pretty Mme. Michelin, she had long ceased talking; very red in the face, she let one of her hands hang under the table, where it was doubtless held by M. de Saffré, who leant awkwardly against the edge of the table, with knit eyebrows and the grimace of a man solving an algebraical problem. Madame Sidonie, too, had made her conquests; the Sieurs Mignon and Charrier, both leaning on their elbows with their faces turned towards her, seemed enraptured at receiving her confidences; she confessed that she loved everything that was made with milk, and that she was frightened of ghosts. And Aristide Saccard himself, his eyes half-closed, plunged in the beatitude of an amphitryon who realizes that he has conscientiously fuddled his guests, had no thought of leaving the table; with respectful tenderness he surveyed the Baron Gouraud laboriously digesting his dinner, his right hand spread over the white cloth, the hand of a sensual old man, short, thick, blotched with purple patches and covered with short red hairs.

Renée drank up automatically the few drops of Tokay that remained at the bottom of her glass. Her face tingled; the little yellow hairs on her neck and temples escaped rebelliously as though moistened by a humid breath. Her lips and nose were nervously contracted, she had the silent expression of a child

that has drunk neat wine. The good middle-class thoughts that had come to her as she sat looking at the shadows of the Parc Monceau were now drowned in the stimulation of food and wine and light, and of the disturbing surroundings, impregnated with hot breath and merriment. She no longer exchanged quiet smiles with her sister Christine and her aunt Élisabeth, both of them modest and retiring, barely uttering a word. With a stony glance she had compelled the poor M. de Mussy to lower his eyes. Though her thoughts were apparently wandering, and she carefully refrained from turning round, and remained leaning back in her chair, against which the satin of her bodice rustled gently, she allowed an imperceptible shudder of the shoulders to escape her at each renewed burst of laughter that came to her from the corner where Maxime and Louise were still making merry, as loudly as ever, amid the dying hum of conversation.

And behind her, on the edge of the shadow, his tall figure beetling over the disordered table and the torpid guests, stood Baptiste, pale and solemn, in the scornful attitude of a flunkey that has gorged his masters. He alone, in the air laden with drunkenness, beneath the vivid light that was turning to yellow, continued correct, with his silver chain round his neck, his cold eyes, in which the sight of the women's shoulders kindled no spark, his air of a eunuch waiting on Parisians of the decadence and retaining his dignity.

At last Renée rose, with a nervous movement.

All followed her example. They adjourned to the drawing-room, where coffee was served.

The large drawing-room was an immense, long room, a sort of gallery that ran from one pavilion to the other, taking up the whole of the façade on the garden side. A large French window opened on to the steps. This gallery glittered with gold. The ceiling, gently arched, had fanciful scrolls winding round great gilt medallions, that shone like bucklers. Bosses and dazzling garlands encircled the arch; fillets of gold, resembling threads of molten metal, ran round the walls, framing the panels, which were hung with red silk; festoons of roses, topped with tufts of full-blown blossoms, hung down along the sides of the mirrors. An Aubusson carpet spread its purple flowers over the polished flooring. The furniture of red silk damask, the door-hangings and window-curtains of the same material, the huge ormolu clock on the mantle-piece, the porcelain vases standing on the consoles, the legs of the two long tables inlaid in Florentine mosaic, the very flower-stands placed in the recesses of the windows, oozed and sweated with gold. At the four corners of the room were four great lamps placed on pedestals of red marble, to which they were fastened by chains of bronze gilt, that fell with symmetrical grace. And from the ceiling hung three lustres with crystal pendants, streaming with drops of blue and pink light, whose hot glare drew a responding gleam from all the gold in the room.

The men soon withdrew to the smoking-room. M. de Mussy went up to Maxime and took him

familiarly by the arm; he had known him at school, though he was six years his senior. He led him on to the terrace, and after they had lighted their cigars he complained bitterly of Renée.

"But tell me, what is the matter with her? I saw her yesterday, and she was charming. And to-day you see, she behaves to me as if all were over between us. What can I have done? It would be kind of you indeed, my dear Maxime, if you would question her and tell her how I am suffering for her."

"Ah! as for that—no!" replied Maxime, laughing. "Renée's nerves are out of order, and I am not disposed to face a storm. You can settle your differences between yourselves."

And he added, after slowly puffing out the smoke of his havanna:

"You want me to do a nice thing, don't you?"

But M. de Mussy spoke of the sincerity of his friendship, and declared that he was only waiting for an opportunity to give Maxime a proof of his devotion. He was very unhappy, he was so deeply in love with Renée!

"Very well then, I will," said Maxime at last, "I will speak to her, but I can promise nothing, you know: she is sure to send me to blazes."

They returned to the smoking-room and stretched themselves at full length in two great lounging-chairs. And there, during a good half-hour, M. de Mussy related his sorrows to Maxime; he told him for the tenth time how he had fallen in love with his step-mother, how she had condescended to notice him;

and Maxime, while finishing his cigar, advised him, explained Renée's nature to him, pointed out to him how he should act in order to subjugate her.

Saccard came and sat down within a few paces of the young men, and M. de Mussy kept silence, while Maxime concluded by saying:

"If I were in your place, I would treat her very cavalierly. She likes that."

The smoking-room was at one end of the large salon: it was one of the round rooms formed by the turrets. It was fitted up very richly and very soberly. Hung with imitation Cordova leather, it had Algerian curtains and door-hangings, and a velvet-pile carpet of Persian design. The furniture, upholstered in maroon-coloured shagreen leather, consisted of ottomans, easy-chairs, and a circular divan that ran round a part of the room. The miniature chandelier, the ornaments on the table and the fire-irons were of pale-green Florentine bronze.

There remained behind with the ladies only a few of the younger men and some old men with pale, flabby faces, who loathed tobacco. In the smoking-room reigned laughter and much free jesting. M. Hupel de la Noue diverted his fellow-guests by repeating the story he had told at dinner, embellished with exceedingly bawdy details. This was his speciality: he had two versions of every anecdote, one for the ladies and the other for men. Then, when Aristide Saccard entered, he was surrounded and complimented; and as he pretended not to understand, M. de Saffré told him, in a heartily-applauded speech, that he had

deserved well of his country for preventing the fair Laure d'Aurigny from falling into the hands of the English.

"No, really, messieurs, you are mistaken," stammered Saccard, with false modesty.

"Go on, why try to excuse yourself?" cried Maxime, humorously. "It was a very fine thing to do, at your time of life."

The young man, who had thrown away his cigar, went back to the drawing-room. A great many people had arrived. The gallery was full of men in evening clothes, standing up and talking in low tones, and of petticoats spread out wide along the settees. Flunkeys had begun to move about with silver salvers loaded with ices and glasses of punch.

Maxime, who wished to speak to Renée, passed through the full length of the drawing-room, knowing from experience the ladies' favourite sanctum. There was, at the opposite end to the smoking-room, to which it formed a pendant, another circular room which had been made into an adorable little drawing-room. This boudoir, with its hangings, curtains and portières of buttercup satin, had a voluptuous charm of an original and exquisite flavour. The lights of the chandelier, a piece of very delicate workmanship, sang a symphony in pale-yellow, amid all these sun-coloured silks. The effect resembled a flood of softened rays, as of the sun setting over a field of ripe wheat. The light expired upon the floor on an Aubusson carpet strewn with dead leaves. An ebony piano inlaid with ivory, two cabinets whose glass doors displayed a host of knick-knacks, a Louis XVI table, a flower-bracket heaped

high with blossoms furnished the room. The settees, the easy-chairs, the ottomans, were covered in quilted buttercup satin, divided at intervals by wide black satin bands embroidered with gaudy tulips. And then there were low seats, and occasional chairs, and every variety of stool, elegant and bizarre. The woodwork of these articles of furniture could not be perceived; the satin and the quilting covered all. The backs were curved with the soft fulness of bolsters. They were like so many discreet couches in whose down one could sleep and love amid the sensual symphony in pale-yellow.

Renée loved this little room, one of whose glass doors opened into the magnificent hot-house built on to the side of the house. In the daytime it was here that she spent her hours of idleness. The yellow hangings, so far from extinguishing her pale hair, gave it a strange golden radiancy; her head stood out pink and white amid a glamour of dawn like that of a fair Diana awakening in the morning light; and this was doubtless the reason why she loved this room that threw her beauty into relief.

At present she was there with her intimate friends. Her sister and aunt had just taken their leave. None but the hare-brained remained in the sanctum. Half thrown back on a settee, Renée was listening to the confidences of her friend Adeline, who was whispering in her ear with kittenish airs and sudden bursts of laughter. Suzanne Haffner was in great request; she was holding her own against a group of young men who pressed her closely, without losing her German listlessness, her provoking effrontery,

cold and bare as her shoulders. In a corner Madame Sidonie in a low voice instilled her precepts into the mind of a young married woman with Madonna-like lashes. Further off stood Louise, talking to a tall, shy young man, who blushed; while the Baron Gouraud dozed in his easy chair in the full light, spreading out his flabby flesh, his wan, elephantine form in the midst of the ladies' frail grace and silken daintiness. And a fairy-like light fell in a golden shower all over the room, on the satin skirts with folds hard and gleaming as porcelain, on the shoulders whose milky whiteness was studded with diamonds. A fluted voice, a laugh like a pigeon's cooing, rang with crystal clearness. It was very warm. Fans beat slowly to and fro like wings disseminating at each stroke into the languid air the musked perfume of the bodices.

When Maxime appeared in the doorway, Renée, who was listening absently to the marquise's stories, rose hastily as if to attend to her duties as hostess. She went into the large drawing-room, where the young man followed her. She took a few steps, smiling, shaking hands with people, and then, drawing Maxime aside:

"Well!" she whispered, ironically, "the burden seems a pleasant one; you no longer find it so stupid to do your own wooing."

"I don't understand," replied Maxime, who had come to plead for M. de Mussy.

"Yet it seems to me that I did well not to deliver you from Louise. You are getting on rapidly, you two."

And she added, with a sort of vexation:

"It was indecent to go on like that at dinner."

Maxime began to laugh.

"Ah yes, we told one another stories. I did not know the little minx. She is quite amusing. She is like a boy."

And as Renée continued her grimace of prudish annoyance, the young man, who had never known her to shew such indignation, resumed with his urbane familiarity:

"Do you imagine, stepmamma, that I pinched her knees under the table? Hang it all, I know how to behave to my future wife! . . . . I have something more serious to say to you. Listen . . . . You are listening, are you not?"

He lowered his voice still more.

"Look here, M. de Mussy is very unhappy, he has just told me so. You know, it is not for me to reconcile you, if you have had a difference. But, you see, I knew him at school, and as he really seemed in despair, I promised to put in a word for him . . . ."

He stopped. Renée was looking at him in an indescribable manner.

"You won't answer? . . . ." he continued. "No matter, I have delivered my message, and you can settle things as you please . . . . But, honestly, I think you are unkind. I felt sorry for the poor fellow. If I were you, I would at least send him a kind word."

Then Renée, who had not ceased to keep her eyes, filled with a glittering light, fixed upon Maxime, said:

"Go and tell M. de Mussy that he's a nuisance.'

And she resumed her slow walk amidst the groups of guests, smiling, bowing, shaking hands with people. Maxime stood where he was, lost in surprise; then he laughed silently to himself.

In no way eager to deliver his message to M. de Mussy, he strolled round the large drawing-room. The reception was dragging itself to its end, marvellous and commonplace, like all receptions. It was close upon midnight; the guests were dropping off one by one. Not caring to go to sleep upon an unpleasant impression, he decided to look for Louise. He was passing before the hall-door, when he saw standing in the vestibule the pretty Madame Michelin, whom her husband was wrapping up daintily in a blue-and-pink opera-cloak.

"He was charming, quite charming," she was saying. "We talked of you all through dinner. He will speak to the minister; only it is not in his province . . . ."

And as a footman, close by them, was helping the Baron Gouraud on with a great fur coat:

"That's the old boy who could carry the thing through!" she added in her husband's ear, while he was tying the ribbon of her hood under her chin. "He can do anything he likes with the minister. To-morrow, at the Mareuils', I must see what . . . ."

M. Michelin smiled. He carried his wife off gingerly, as though he had something valuable and fragile under his arm. Maxime, after glancing round to assure himself that Louise was not in the hall, went straight to the small drawing-room. And he

found her still there, almost alone, waiting for her father who had spent the evening in the smoking-room with the politicians. Most of the ladies, the marquise, Madame Haffner, had left. Only Madame Sidonie remained behind, explaining to some wives of officials how fond she was of animals.

"Ah! here is my little husband," cried Louise. "Sit down here and tell me where my father has fallen asleep. He must have fancied that he was already in the Chamber."

Maxime replied in a similar strain, and the two young people began laughing again as loudly as at dinner. Sitting on a very low stool at her feet, he ended by taking her hands, by playing with her as with a school-fellow. And, in fact, in her frock of white foulard with red spots, with her high-cut bodice, her flat breast, and her ugly, cunning little street-boy's head, she might have passed for a boy dressed up as a girl. Yet at times her shrivelled arms, her distorted form, would assume a pose of abandonment, and a light would flash from the depth of her eyes, still full of callowness; but not the least blush in the world was brought to her cheek by Maxime's romping. And they both laughed on, thinking themselves alone, without perceiving Renée, who stood half-hidden in the middle of the conservatory, watching them from a distance.

A moment before, as she was crossing a walk, the sight of Maxime and Louise had suddenly caused Renée to stand still behind a shrub. Around her the hot-house, resembling the nave of a church, with an arched glass roof supported by straight, slender iron

columns, displayed its fat vegetation, its masses of lusty verdure, its spreading rockets of foliage.

In the middle, in an oval tank level with the flooring, lived, with the mysterious sea-green life of water-plants, all the aquatic flora of the tropics. Cyclanthus-plants, displaying their streaks of variegated green, raised a monumental girdle around the fountain, which resembled the truncated capital of some cyclopean column. At either end, two tall tornelias reared their quaint brushwood above the water, their dry, bare stems contorted like agonizing serpents, and let fall aërial roots, that seemed like a fisherman's nets hung up in the open air. Near the edge, a Javanese pandanus spread its cluster of green leaves streaked with white, thin as swords, prickly and fretted as Malay creeses. And on the surface, in the warmth of the tepid sheet of slumbering water, great water-lilies opened out their pink petals, and euryales trailed their round leaves, their leprous leaves, floating like the backs of monstrous blistered toads.

By way of turf, a broad edging of selaginella encircled the tank. This dwarf fern formed a thick mossy carpet of a light green shade. And beyond the great circular path, four enormous clusters of plants shot vigorously right up to the roof: palms, drooping gently in their elegance, spreading their fans, displayed their rounded crowns, hung down their leaves like oars wearied by their perpetual voyage through the blue; tall Indian bamboos rose straight, hard, slender, dropping from on high their light shower of leaves; a ravenala, the traveller's

tree, reared its bouquet of huge Chinese hand-screens; and in a corner a plantain-tree, loaded with fruit, stretched out on all sides its long horizontal leaves, on which two lovers might easily recline clasped in each other's embrace. In the corners were Abyssinian euphorbias, deformed prickly cactuses, covered with loathly excrescences, oozing with poison. And beneath the trees the ground was carpeted with creeping ferns, adianta and pterides, their fronds outlined daintily like fine lace. Alsophilas of a taller species tapered upwards with their rows of symmetrical foliage, hexagonal, so regular as to have the appearance of large pieces of porcelain destined to hold the fruit of some titanic desert. The shrubberies were surrounded with a border of begonias and caladiums; begonias, with twisted leaves, gorgeously streaked with red and green; caladiums whose spear-headed leaves, white, with veins of green, looked like large butterfly-wings; bizarre plants, whose foliage lives strangely with the sombre or wan splendour of noisome flowers.

Behind the shrubberies, a second and narrower pathway ran round the green-house. There, on stages, half concealing the hot-water pipes, bloomed marantas, soft as velvet to the touch, gloxinias, purple-belled, dracœnas, resembling blades of old lacquer.

But one of the charms of this winter-garden was the four alcoves of verdure at the corners, roomy arbours closed in by thick curtains of creepers. Scraps of virgin forest had here erected their leafy walls, their impenetrable confusion of stems, of supple shoots that clung to the branches, shot through space

in reckless flight, and fell from the arched roof like tassels of ornate drapery. A stalk of vanilla, whose ripe pods emitted a pungent perfume, trailed about a moss-grown portico; Indian berries draped the thin pillars with their round leaves; bauhinias with their red clusters, quisqualias with flowers pendant like bead necklaces glided, twined and intertwined like slim adders, endlessly playing and creeping amid the darkness of the growths.

And beneath arches, placed here and there between the beds of shrubs, hung baskets suspended from wire chains, and filled with orchids, fantastic plants of the air, which pushed in every direction their crooked tendrils, bent and twisted like the limbs of cripples. There were cypripediums, whose flowers resemble a wonderful slipper with a heel adorned with a dragon-fly's wings; ærides, so delicately scented; stanhopeas, with pale tiger flowers, which exhale from afar a strong and acrid breath, as from the putrid throats of the convalescent sick.

But what most struck the eye from every point of the walks was a great Chinese hibiscus, whose immense expanse of foliage and flowers covered the whole wall of the house on to which the conservatory was built. The huge purple flowers of this giant mallow, unceasingly renewed, live but a few hours. They resembled as who should say the eager, sensual mouths of women, the red lips, soft and moist, of some colossal Messalina, bruised by kisses, and ever reviving with their hungry, bleeding smiles.

Renée, standing by the tank, shivered in the midst of this verdant magnificence. Behind her, a

great sphinx in black marble, squatting upon a block of granite, turned its head towards the fountain with a cat's cruel and wary smile; and, with its polished thighs, it looked like the dark idol of this tropical clime. From globes of ground glass came a light that covered the leaves with milky stains. Statues, heads of women with necks thrown back, swelling with laughter, stood out white against the background of the shrubberies, with patches of shadow which distorted the mad gaiety upon their faces. Strange rays of light played about the dull, still water of the tank, throwing up vague shapes, glaucous masses with monstrous outlines. A flood of white light streamed over the ravenala's glossy leaves, over the lacquered fans of the latanias; while from the lace-work of the ferns fell drops of light in a fine shower. Up above shone the reflections from the glass roof, between the sombre tops of the tall palm-trees. And all around was massed in darkness; the arbours, with their hangings of creepers, were drowned in tenebrous gloom, like the lairs of slumbering serpents.

Renée stood musing beneath the bright light, watching Louise and Maxime in the distance. She no longer felt the fleeting fancies, the gray, twilight temptations of the chilly avenues of the Bois. Her thoughts were no longer lulled to sleep by the trot of her horses along the mundane turf, the glades in which middle-class families take their Sunday repasts. This time she was permeated with a keen and definite desire.

Unbridled love and voluptuous appetite haunted this stifling nave in which seethed the ardent sap of

the tropics. Renée was wrapt in the puissant bridals of the earth which gave birth to those dark growths, those colossal stamina; and the acrid birth-throes of this hot-bed, of this forest expansion, of this mass of vegetation all glowing with the entrails that nourished it, surrounded her with perturbing effluvia full of intoxication. At her feet steamed the tank, the mass of tepid water thickened by the saps from the floating roots, enveloping her shoulders with a mantle of heavy vapours; a mist that warmed her skin like the touch of a hand moist with concupiscence. Overhead she could smell the palm-trees whose tall leaves shook down their aroma. And more than the stifling heat of the air, more than the brilliant light, more than the great dazzling flowers, like faces laughing or grimacing between the leaves, it was the odours, above all, that overpowered her. An indescribable perfume, potent, provocative, composed of a thousand perfumes, hung about her; human exudation, the breath of women, the scent of hair; and zephyrs sweet and swooningly faint were blended with zephyrs coarse, pestilential, laden with poison. But, amid this rare music of odours, the dominant melody that constantly returned, stifling the sweetness of the vanilla and the orchids' stridency, was that penetrating, sensual smell of flesh, that smell of love escaping in the morning hour from the close chamber of a bridegroom and bride.

Renée sank back slowly, leaning against the granite pedestal. In her dress of green satin, her head and breast flushed and bedewed with the bright scintillations of her diamonds, she resembled a great flower, green and pink, one of the water-lilies from

the tank, swooning with heat. In this moment of enlightenment, all her good resolutions vanished for ever, the intoxication of dinner returned to her head, arrogant, triumphant, redoubled in force by the flames of the hot-house. She thought no longer of the freshness of the night, that had calmed her, of the murmuring shadows of the gardens, whose voices had whispered in her ear the bliss of serenity. In her were aroused the senses of a woman who desires, the caprices of a woman who is satiated. And above her head, the great black marble sphinx laughed its mystic laugh, as if it had read the longing, formulated at last, that galvanized that dead heart, the fugitive longing, the "something different" vainly sought for by Renée in the rocking of her calash, in the fine ashes of the falling night, and now suddenly revealed to her beneath the dazzling light of this blazing garden by the sight of Maxime and Louise, laughing and playing, their hands interlocked.

Now a sound of voices issued from an adjacent arbour into which Aristide Saccard had led the Sieurs Mignon and Charrier.

"No, Monsieur Saccard," said the latter's fat voice, "we really cannot take that back at more than two hundred francs the mètre."

And Saccard's shrill tones retorted:

"But in my share you valued each mètre of frontage at two hundred and fifty francs."

"Well, listen, we will make it two hundred and twenty-five francs."

And the voices went on, coarse, sounding strangely under the clumps of drooping palm-trees. But they

passed like an empty noise through Renée's dream, as there rose before her, with the fatal summons experienced by one looking over a precipice, an unknown joyance, hot with crime, more violent than all those which she had already drained, the last that remained in her cup. She felt weary no longer.

The shrub that half concealed her was a malignant plant, a Madagascar tanghin-tree with broad box-like leaves with whitish stems, whose smallest veins distilled a venomous fluid. And at a moment when Louise and Maxime laughed more loudly in the yellow refraction, in the sunset of the little boudoir, Renée, her mind wandering, her mouth parched and stung, took between her lips a sprig of the tanghin-tree which came to the level of her teeth, and closed them on one of its bitter leaves.

CHAPTER II

Aristide Rougon swept down upon Paris on the morrow of the 2 Décembre, like a carrion bird that scents the field of battle from afar. He came from Plassans, a sous-préfecture in the south, where his father had at length, in the troubled waters of events, netted a long-coveted appointment as receiver of taxes. He himself, still young, had compromised himself like a fool, without fame or profit, and could consider himself fortunate to have emerged safe and sound from the scrimmage. He came with a rush, furious at having taken a false step, cursing the country, talking of Paris with the ravenous hunger of a wolf, swearing "that he would never be such an ass again;" and the bitter smile which accompanied these words assumed a terrible significance on his thin lips.

He arrived in the early days of 1852. He brought with him his wife Angèle, a fair-haired, insipid person, whom he installed in a cramped lodging in the Rue Saint-Jacques, like an inconvenient piece of furniture that he was eager to get out of the way. The young wife had refused to be separated from her daughter, little Clotilde, a child of four, whom the father would gladly have left

behind in the care of his family. But he had only yielded to Angèle's desire on the stipulation that the college at Plassans should remain the home of their son Maxime, a scapegrace of eleven, whom his grandmother had promised to look after. Aristide wanted to have his hands free: a wife and a child already seemed to him a crushing burden for a man decided to surmount every obstacle, not caring whether he got rolled in the mud or broke his back in the attempt.

On the very night of his arrival, while Angèle was unpacking the trunks, he felt a keen desire to explore Paris, to tread with his clodhopping shoes the burning stones from which he hoped to extract millions of money. He simply took possession of the city. He walked for the sake of walking, going along the pavements as though he were in a conquered country. He saw before him clearly the battle he had come to fight, and he felt no repugnance in comparing himself to a skilful picklock who was about, by ruse or violence, to seize his share of the common wealth which so far had been malignantly denied him. Had he felt the need of an excuse, he would have invoked his desires, which had for ten years been stifled, his wretched provincial existence, and above all his mistakes, for which he held society at large responsible. But at this moment, amid this emotion of the gambler who at last places his eager hands on the green cloth, he felt nothing but joy, a joy all his own, in which were mingled the gratification of covetousness and the expectations of unpunished roguery. The Paris air intoxicated him; he thought he could hear in the rumbling of the carriages the voices from *Macbeth* calling to

him: "Thou shalt be rich!" For close upon two hours he thus walked from street to street, tasting the delights of a man who gives play to his vices. He had not been back in Paris since the happy year which he had spent there as a student. The night fell: his dream grew in the bright light thrown on the pavement by the shops and cafés; he lost himself.

When he raised his eyes, he found he was in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, near the middle. One of his brothers, Eugène Rougon, lived in an adjacent street, the Rue Penthièvre. When coming to Paris, Aristide had reckoned particularly upon Eugène, who, after having been one of the most active participators in the Coup d'État, was now an occult force, a lawyer of small account about to develop into a politician of great importance. But with the superstition of a gambler, Aristide decided not to knock at his brother's door that evening. He returned slowly to the Rue Saint-Jacques, thinking of Eugène with a dull feeling of jealousy, contemplating his shabby clothes still covered with the dust of the journey, and seeking consolation in the resumption of his dream of wealth. But even this dream had turned to bitterness. After starting out for the sake of expansion, and being exhilarated by the bustling activity of the Paris shops, he returned home irritated by the happiness that seemed to him to fill the streets, intensified in his ferocity, picturing to himself relentless struggles in which he would take delight in beating and cheating the crowd that had jostled him on the pavement. Never had he known an appetite so vast, an eagerness so pressing for enjoyment.

At daybreak the next morning he was at his brother's. Eugène lived in two large, cold, barely-furnished rooms, that chilled Aristide to the marrow. He had looked to find his brother wallowing in the lap of luxury. Eugène was working at a small black table. All he said was, with a smile, in his slow voice :

" Ah ! there you are, I was expecting you."

Aristide was very bitter. He accused Eugène of leaving him to vegetate, of not even having had the charity to give him a word of good advice while he was floundering about in the country. He could never forgive himself for remaining a Republican up to the 2 Décembre ; it was an open sore with him, an everlasting confusion. Eugène had quietly taken up his pen. When the other had finished :

" Bah ! " he said. " All mistakes can be set right. You have a career before you full of promise."

He spoke these words in so decided a voice, with a look so piercing, that Aristide lowered his head, feeling that his brother was penetrating into the very depths of his nature. The latter continued with friendly bluntness :

" You have come here to ask me to find you an appointment, have you not ? I have been thinking of you, but I have heard of nothing yet. You understand, I must be careful where I put you. What you want is a place where you can feather your nest without danger either to yourself or to me . . . . Don't trouble to protest, we are quite alone, we can say what we like . . . ."

Aristide thought it best to laugh.

"Oh, I know you have your wits about you," Eugène continued, "and that you are not likely to make a fool of yourself for no purpose . . . . As soon as a good opportunity presents itself, I will give you the berth. Meantime, whenever you want twenty francs or so, come and ask me for it."

They talked an instant of the rising in the South, through which their father had gained his appointment as receiver of taxes. Eugène dressed himself while they were talking. As he was about to take leave of his brother downstairs in the street, he detained him a moment longer, and said to him in a lower tone of voice :

"You will do me a favour by not seeking work on your own account, but by waiting at home quietly for the appointment which I promise you . . . . I should not like to see my brother hanging about in people's waiting-rooms."

Aristide had a certain respect for Eugène, whom he looked upon as an uncommonly smart chap. He could not forgive his distrustfulness, nor his candour, which was a trifle blunt ; still he went home obediently and shut himself up in the Rue Saint-Jacques. He had arrived with five hundred francs which had been lent him by his wife's father. After paying the expenses of the journey, he made the three hundred francs that remained last him a month. Angèle was a great eater; moreover she thought it necessary to trim her Sunday dress with a fresh set of mauve ribbons. That month of waiting seemed endless to Aristide. He was consumed with impatience. When he sat at his window and watched the gigantic labour

of Paris seething beneath him, he was struck with an insane desire to hurl himself straightway into the furnace, in order with his fevered hands to mould the gold like soft wax. He inhaled the breath, vague as yet, that rose from the great city, that breath of the budding Empire, laden already with the odours of alcoves and financial hells, with the warm effluvia of sensuality. The faint fumes that reached him told him that he was on the right scent, that the game was scudding before him, that the great imperial hunt, the hunt after adventures, women, and millions, was at last about to commence. His nostrils quivered, his instinct, the instinct of a famished beast, dexterously seized upon the slightest indications of the division of spoil of which the city was to be the arena.

Twice he called on his brother, to urge him to greater activity. Eugène received him gruffly, told him again that he was not forgetting him, but that he must have patience. He at last received a letter asking him to call at the Rue Penthièvre. He went, his heart beating violently, as though he was on his way to an assignation. He found Eugène sitting before his everlasting little black table in the great bleak room which he used as a study. So soon as he saw him, the lawyer handed him a document, and said:

"There, I got your business settled yesterday. This is your appointment as an assistant surveying-clerk at the Hôtel de Ville. Your salary will be two thousand four hundred francs."

Aristide remained where he stood. He turned

pale, and did not take the document, thinking that his brother was making fun of him. He had expected an appointment of at least six thousand francs. Eugène, suspecting what was passing in his mind, turned his chair round, and, folding his arms, exclaimed, with a show of anger:

"So you are a fool, then, are you? . . . . You indulge in dreams like a girl. You want to live in a handsome flat, to keep servants, to eat well, to sleep in silken sheets, to take your pleasure in the arms of the first woman that comes, in a boudoir furnished in a couple of hours . . . . You and your sort, if you had your way, would empty the coffers even before they were full. But, good God, why can't you be patient? See how I live, and in order to pick up your fortune at least take the trouble to stoop."

He spoke with a profound contempt for his brother's schoolboy impatience. One could feel, through his rude speech, a higher ambition, a desire for unmitigated power; this candid craving for money must have seemed common to him, and puerile. He continued in a gentler voice, with a subtle smile:

"No doubt you have excellent propensities, and I have no wish to thwart them. Men like you are worth much to us. We fully intend to choose our best friends from among the hungriest. Set your mind at rest, we shall keep open table, and the most unbounded appetites shall be satisfied. It is, after all, the easiest way of governing . . . . But for Heaven's sake wait till the cloth is laid; and, if you take my advice, you will go to the kitchen yourself and fetch your own knife and fork."

Aristide still remained sullen. His brother's metaphorical humour in no way raised his spirits. And Eugène once more gave vent to his anger.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "I was right in my first opinion: you are a fool . . . . Why, what did you expect, what did you imagine I was going to do with your illustrious person? You have not even had the spirit to finish your law studies; you bury yourself for ten years in a miserable clerkship in a sous-préfecture; and you come down upon me with the odious reputation of a Republican whom the Coup d'État alone was able to convert . . . . Do you think there is the making of a minister in you, with a record like that? . . . . Oh, I know you have in your favour your savage desire to succeed by any possible means. It is a great point, I admit, and it is that which I had in my mind when I got you this appointment in the Hôtel de Ville."

And rising, he thrust the nomination into Aristide's hands, and continued:

"Take it, and some day you'll thank me! I chose the place for you myself, and I know what you'll be able to get out of it . . . . You have only to look about you and to keep your ears open. If you know your way about, you will understand, and act accordingly . . . . Now remember carefully what I am about to add. We are entering upon a period when fortune will be within the reach of anyone. Make as much money as you like: I give you leave; only no folly, no flagrant scandal, or I'll exterminate you."

This threat produced the effect which his promises had not been able to bring about. All Aristide s

ardour was rekindled at the thought of the fortune of which his brother spoke. It seemed to him that he was at last let loose in the fray, authorized to cut throats, provided he did so legally, and without causing too much commotion. Eugène gave him two hundred francs to keep him till the end of the month. Then he paused, reflecting.

"I am thinking of changing my name," he said at last; "you should do the same . . . . We should be less in each other's way."

"As you like," answered Aristide quietly.

"You need take no trouble in the matter, I will attend to the formalities . . . . Would you like to call yourself Sicardot, your wife's name?"

Aristide raised his eyes to the ceiling, repeating the name and listening to the sound of the syllables:

"Sicardot . . . . Aristide Sicardot . . . . No, I wouldn't; it's clumsy and stinks of failure."

"Think of something else then," said Eugène.

"I would prefer Sicard simply," resumed the other after a pause: "Aristide Sicard . . . . that's not so bad, is it? . . . . a little frivolous, perhaps . . . ."

He thought a moment longer, and then, triumphantly:

"I have it, I've found it," he cried . . . . "Saccard, Aristide Saccard! . . . . with two c's . . . . Eh! there's money in that name; it sounds as if you were counting five-franc pieces."

Eugène's was a savage type of humour. He dismissed his brother, and said to him with a smile:

"Yes, a name that ought to make either a felon or a millionaire of you."

A few days later Aristide Saccard was installed at the Hôtel de Ville. He learnt that his brother must have had great influence to get him admitted without the usual examinations.

And then the household entered upon the monotonous life of a small clerk. Aristide and his wife resumed their Plassans habits. Only they had fallen from a dream of sudden fortune, and their poverty-stricken existence seemed the heavier to them since they had come to look upon it as a time of probation whose length they were unable to determine. To be poor in Paris is to be doubly poor. Angèle accepted penury with the listlessness of a chlorotic woman; she spent her days in the kitchen, or else lolling on the floor playing with her daughter, never bewailing her lot till the last franc was reached. But Aristide quivered with rage in this poverty, in this narrow existence, in which he turned about like a caged beast. For him it was a period of unspeakable suffering; his pride was wounded to the quick, his unsatisfied cravings goaded him to madness. His brother succeeded in getting elected to the Corps Législatif by the arrondissement of Plassans, and he suffered all the more. He was too conscious of Eugène's superiority to be foolishly jealous: he accused him of not doing as much as he might have done for him. Time after time he was driven by want to go to him and borrow money of him. Eugène lent him the money, but reproached him roughly for his lack of spirit and willingness. After that Aristide set his back up. He swore he would never ask anybody for a sou, and he kept his word. The last week of

each month Aristide ate dry bread and sighed. This apprenticeship completed Saccard's gruesome training. His lips became still more thin; he was no longer fool enough to dream of millions aloud; his emaciated person became dumb, and expressed but one desire, one fixed idea, that never left his mind. When he trotted from the Rue Saint-Jacques to the Hôtel de Ville, his worn heels sounded sharply on the pavement, and he buttoned himself up in his threadbare frock-coat as in an asylum of hatred, while his weasel's nose sniffed the air of the streets: a jagged symbol of the envious wretchedness that one sees prowling over the pavements of Paris, carrying abroad its plan of fortune and its dream of gratification.

In the early part of 1853, Aristide was appointed a surveying commissioner of roads. His salary was to be four thousand five hundred francs. This increase came in the nick of time: Angèle was in a decline, little Clotilde had lost all her colour. He kept on his scanty lodgings of two small rooms, the dining-room furnished in walnut and the bedroom in mahogany, and continued to lead a harsh existence, avoiding debt, not desiring to touch other people's money until he was able to plunge his arms into it up to the elbows. He thus belied his instincts, scorning the few additional sous that came to him, remaining on the look-out. Angèle was perfectly happy. She bought herself some things and ate meat every day. She could no longer understand her husband's suppressed anger, nor the reason why he wore the sombre expression of a man working out the solution of a formidable problem.

Aristide followed Eugène's advice: he kept his ears and eyes open. When he went to thank his brother for his promotion, the latter observed the change that had taken place in him; he complimented him on what he called his sensible demeanour. The clerk, inwardly hardened by jealousy, had become supple and insinuating. A few months had sufficed to transform him into an admirable comedian. All his Southern ardour had been aroused; and he carried his cunning so far that his fellow-clerks at the Hôtel de Ville looked upon him as an inoffensive fellow whom his near relationship to a deputy marked out beforehand for some fat appointment. This relationship secured for him the goodwill also of his superiors. He thus enjoyed a sort of authority above his position, which enabled him to open certain doors and to explore certain receptacles without any blame being attached to his indiscretions. For two years he was seen to roam about all the passages, linger in all the rooms, leave his seat twenty times a day to go and talk to a friend, or carry an instruction, or take a stroll through the offices, endless journeys that caused his colleagues to exclaim, "That devil of a Provençal! he can't sit still: his legs are always on the move." His personal friends took him for an idler, and our worthy laughed when they accused him of having but one thought, to despoil the service of a few minutes. He never made the mistake of listening at key-holes; but he had a way of boldly opening a door and walking across a room, with a document in his hand and a preoccupied air, with a step so slow and even that he did not lose a word of the conversation. This was

a masterpiece of tactics; people ended by not interrupting themselves when this assiduous clerk passed by them, gliding through the shadows of the offices, and seemingly so wrapped up in his business. He had still one other method; he was extraordinarily obliging, he offered to help his fellow-clerks whenever they dropped into arrears with their work, and he would then study the registers and documents that passed through his hands with meditative fondness. But one of his favourite tricks was to strike up a friendship with the messengers. He went so far as to shake them by the hand. For hours together he would keep them talking between the doors, with little stifled bursts of laughter, telling them stories, drawing them out. The worthy men worshipped him, and said of him, "There's a man who isn't haughty." He was the first to be told of any scandal that might occur. And thus it came about that at the end of two years the Hôtel de Ville was an open book to him. He knew every member of the staff down to the least of the lamp-lighters, and every paper down to the laundress's bills.

The Paris of that period offered a most fascinating study to a man like Aristide Saccard. The Empire had just been proclaimed, after the famous journey in the course of which the Prince-President had succeeded in stirring up the enthusiasm of a few Bonapartist departments. The platform and the press were silent. Society, saved once again, shook hands with itself, took its ease, lay abed of a morning, now that it had a strong government to protect it and relieve it from the trouble of thinking

and looking after its interests. The great preoccupation of society was to know with what amusement to kill time. In Eugène Rougon's happy phrase, Paris had sat down to dinner, and was contemplating bawdiness at dessert. Politics terrified it, like a dangerous drug. Men's enervated minds turned towards pleasure and speculation. Those who had money brought it forth from its hiding-place, and those who had none sought for forgotten treasures in every nook and cranny. And underneath the turmoil there ran a subdued quiver, a nascent sound of five-franc pieces, of women's rippling laughter, and the yet faint clatter of plate and murmur of kisses. In the midst of the great silence, the absolute peace of the new reign of order, arose every kind of attractive rumour, of golden and voluptuous promise. It was as if one were passing in front of one of those little houses whose closely-drawn curtains reveal nothing beyond the shadows of women, whence no sound issues but that of the gold on the marble chimney-pieces. The Empire was on the point of turning Paris into the bawdy-house of Europe. The handful of adventurers who had succeeded in purloining a throne required a reign of adventures, of shady transactions, of sold consciences, of bought women, of rampant and universal drunkenness. And in the city where the blood of December was yet hardly washed away, there sprang up, timidly as yet, that mad desire for dissipation that was destined to drag down the country to the limbo of decayed and dishonoured nations.

From the very beginning Aristide Saccard felt

the advent of this rising tide of speculation, whose spume was in the end to cover the whole of Paris. He watched its progress with profound attention. He found himself in the very midst of the hot rain of crown-pieces that fell thickly on to the city's roofs. In his incessant wanderings across the Hôtel de Ville, he had got wind of the vast project for the transformation of Paris, of the plan of those clearances, those new roads and improvised districts, that formidable piece of jobbery in the sale of real property, which gave rise in the four quarters of the town to the conflict of interests and the blaze of luxury unrestrained. From that time forward his activity had a purpose. It was at this period that he developed his geniality. He even fattened out a little, he ceased hurrying through the streets like an attenuated cat in search of its prey. At his office he was more chatty, more obliging than ever. His brother, whom he visited in a more or less official manner, complimented him on putting his advice so happily into practice. About the beginning of 1854 Saccard confided to him that he had several pieces of business in view, but that he would require a rather large advance.

"Look for it," said Eugène.

"You are quite right, I will look for it," he replied, with entire good humour, appearing not to perceive that his brother declined to supply him with the preliminary capital.

It was the thought of this capital that now worried him. His plan was formed, it matured day by day.

But the first few thousand francs were not to be found. His will became more and more tense; he looked at the people in the streets in a nervous and penetrating manner, as though he were seeking a lender in every wayfarer. At home Angèle continued to lead her subdued and contented existence. He awaited his opportunity; and his genial laughter became more bitter as this opportunity delayed in presenting itself.

Aristide had a sister in Paris. Sidonie Rougon had married at Plassans an attorney's clerk, and together they had set up business in the Rue Saint-Honoré as dealers in fruit from the South of France. When her brother came across her, the husband had vanished, and the business had long ago disappeared. She was living in the Rue du Faubourg-Poissonnière, in a little entresol consisting of three rooms. She also leased the shop on the ground-floor beneath her flat, a narrow and mysterious establishment in which she pretended to carry on a business in lace; and there were, as a matter of fact, in the window some odds and ends of guipure and Valenciennes, hung over gilt rods; but the inside looked like a waiting-room, with a polished wainscotting and not the least sign of goods for sale. The door and window, were veiled with light curtains, which sheltered the shop from the gaze of the passers-by and completed its discreet and secluded appearance, as of the atrium to some unknown temple. It was a rare thing for a customer to be seen calling on Madame Sidonie; most frequently even the handle was removed from the door. She made it known in the

neighbourhood that she waited personally upon wealthy women and offered them her lace. The convenience of the place, she used to say, was her sole reason for hiring the shop and the entresol, which communicated by means of a staircase hidden in the wall. As a matter of fact the lace-woman was always out of doors; she was seen hurrying in and out ten times in a single day. Moreover, she did not confine herself to the lace-trade; she made use of her entresol, filling it up with a stock of things picked up nobody knew where. She had there dealt in gutta-percha goods, waterproofs, goloshes, braces, and the rest; and then followed one after the other a new oil for promoting the growth of the hair, appliances for curing deformities, a patent automatic coffee-pot, the working of which had cost her a deal of trouble. When her brother called to see her she was selling pianos; her entresol was crammed with these instruments; there were pianos even in her bedroom, a very coquettishly-furnished room that clashed with the sale-room disorder of the two others. She carried on these two businesses with perfect method; the customers who came for the goods on the entresol came in and went out through a carriage-entrance that led into the house from the Rue Papillon; you had to know the secret of the little staircase in order to be aware of the two-fold nature of the lace-woman's dealings. On the entresol she called herself Madame Touche, her husband's name, while on the door of the shop she had put only her Christian name, which caused her to be generally known as Madame Sidonie.

Madame Sidonie was thirty-five; but she dressed herself with so little care, and had so little of the woman in her manner, that one would have thought her much older. As a matter of fact she had no age. She wore an everlasting black dress, frayed at the edges, rumpled and discoloured by use, recalling an advocate's gown worn out by the wear and tear of the bar. Clad further in a black bonnet that came down to her forehead and hid her hair, and a pair of thick shoes, she trotted along the streets, carrying on her arm a little basket whose handles were mended with string. This basket, which never left her, was a world in itself. When she raised the lid there came from it samples of every sort, note-books, pocket-books, above all handfuls of stamped documents, the illegible writing on which she was peculiarly adroit at deciphering. She combined the attributes of the bailiff and the commission-agent. She lived among protests, judgment summonses, and orders of court; when she had sold ten francs' worth of lace or pomade, she would insinuate herself into her customer's good graces and become her man of business, attending attorneys, advocates, and judges on her behalf. She would thus for weeks hawk about the particulars of a case at the bottom of her basket, taking the devil's own trouble, going from one end of Paris to the other, with a little even trot, never taking a conveyance. It would have been difficult to say what profit she made from this sort of business; she did it to begin with from an innate taste for shady traffic and a fondness for sharp practice; and then she secured a host of little advantages: dinners on ever hand, franc pieces

picked up here and there. But after all her most distinct gain lay in the confidences she everywhere received, putting her on the track of good strokes of business and useful windfalls. Living in the homes of others, in the business of others, she was a real walking catalogue of wants and offers. She knew where there was a daughter that had to get married at once, a family that stood in need of three thousand francs, an old gentleman willing to lend the three thousand francs, but on substantial security and at a fat rate of interest. She knew of matters more delicate than these: the sad feelings of a fair-haired lady who was not understood by her husband, and who yearned to be understood; the secret aspirations of a good mother who wished to see her little girl comfortably married; the tastes of a baron keen on little supper-parties and very young girls. And with a pale smile she hawked these wants and offers about; she would do miles on foot to interview people; she sent the baron to the good mother, induced the old gentleman to lend the three thousand francs to the distressed family, found consolation for the fair-haired lady and a not too inquiring husband for the girl that had to get married. She had big affairs on hand too, affairs that she could speak of aloud, pestering everybody who came near her: an interminable lawsuit that a noble but ruined family had employed her to look after, and a debt contracted by England to France in the days of the Stuarts, whose figures, with the compound interest added, ran up to close upon three milliards of francs. This debt of three milliards was her hobby; she explained the case with great wealth

of detail, launching out into quite an historical lecture, and a flush of enthusiasm would rise to her cheeks, usually flaccid and yellow as wax. Occasionally, between a visit to bailiff and a call on a friend, she would get rid of a coffee-pot, a waterproof, or sell a bit of lace, or place a piano on the hire system. These things gave her the least trouble. Then she would hurry back to her shop, where a customer had made an appointment to inspect a piece of Chantilly. The customer arrived and glided like a shadow into the discreetly-veiled shop. And not unfrequently a gentleman would at the same time come in by the carriage-entrance in the Rue Papillon to see Madame Touche's pianos on the entresol.

If Madame Sidonie failed to make her fortune, it was because she often worked for art's sake. Loving litigation, neglecting her own business for that of others, she allowed herself to be fleeced by the bailiffs, though this gave her, for the rest, a rapture unknown save to the litigious. All the woman in her vanished; she became a mere man of business, a commission-agent bustling about Paris at all hours, carrying in her fabulous basket the most equivocal articles, selling everything, dreaming of milliards, and appearing in court, on behalf of a favourite client, over a contested matter of ten francs. Short, lean, and sallow, clad in the thin black dress that looked as though it had been cut out of an advocate's gown, she had shrivelled out of recognition, and to see her creeping along the houses, one would have taken her for an errand-boy dressed up as a girl. Her complexion had the piteous pallor of stamped paper. Her lips smiled an

extinct smile, while her eyes seemed to swim in the whirpool of jobs and preoccupations of every kind with which she stuffed her brains. Her ways, for the rest, were timid and discreet, with a vague reminiscence of the priest's confessional and the midwife's closet, and she had the maternal gentleness of a nun who, having renounced all worldly affections, feels pity for the sufferings of the heart. She never spoke of her husband, nor of her childhood, her family, her personal concerns. There was only one thing that she never sold, and that was her person; not that she had any scruples, but because the idea of such a bargain could not possibly occur to her. She was as dry as an invoice, as cold as a protest, and at bottom as brutal and indifferent as a broker's man.

Saccard, fresh up from the country, was unable at first to fathom the subtle depths of Madame Sidonie's numerous trades. As he had read law for twelve months, she spoke to him one day of the three milliards with an air of seriousness that gave him a poor opinion of her intellect. She came and rummaged in the corners of the lodgings in the Rue Saint-Jacques, weighed Angèle with a glance, and did not return except when her errands brought her to the neighbourhood, and she felt a want to discuss the question of the three milliards. Angèle had nibbled at the story of the English debt. The agent mounted her hobby, and made the gold rain down for an hour. It was the crack in this quick intelligence, the sweet mad lullaby of a life wasted in squalid dealings, the magical charm with which she ensorcelled not only herself but the more credulous among her clients. Firm in her

Chapter II

The customer arrived and glided like a shadow into the discreetly-veiled shop. And not unfrequently a gentleman would at the same time come in by the carriage-entrance in the Rue Papillon to see Madame Touche's pianos on the entresol.

E. Decisy

conviction moreover, she ended by speaking of the three milliards as of a personal fortune which the judges were bound sooner or later to restore to her; and this threw a wondrous halo about her poor black bonnet upon which a few faded violets curtsied on brass wires that showed the metal. Angèle opened wide her eyes. She spoke repeatedly of her sister-in-law to her husband with respectfulness, saying that perhaps Madame Sidonie would make them rich one day. Saccard shrugged his shoulders; he had been to see the shop and entresol in the Faubourg-Poissonière, and had read nothing there but approaching bankruptcy. He tried to learn Eugène's opinion of their sister; but his brother became grave, and merely replied that he never saw her, that he knew her to be a very intelligent woman, a little compromising, perhaps. Nevertheless, as Saccard was returning to the Rue Penthièvre some time afterwards, he thought he saw Mme. Sidonie's black dress leave his brother's and glide rapidly along the houses. He ran after it, but was unable again to catch sight of the black dress. The she-agent had one of those spare figures that get lost in a crowd. He stood pondering, and from this moment he began to study his sister more attentively. It was not long before he grasped the immensity of the toil performed by this pale, nebulous, little creature, whose whole face seemed to melt away into shapelessness. He respected her. She was a true Rougon. He recognized this hunger for money, this longing for intrigue, which was the characteristic of the family; only in her case, thanks to the surroundings amid which she had matured, thanks to that Paris where

each morning she had to seek to make her evening black bread, the common temperament had deviated from its course, producing this extraordinary hermaphrodism of the woman grown sexless, man of business and procuress in one.

When Saccard, after having drawn up his schemes, set out in search of his preliminary capital, his thoughts naturally turned towards his sister. She shook her head, and sighed, talked of her three milliards. But the clerk would not humour her madness, he pulled her up roughly each time she got back to the Stuart debt; this myth seemed to him to disgrace so practical an intellect. Mme. Sidonie, who quietly accepted the most cutting satire without allowing her convictions to be shaken, next explained to him with great lucidity that he would not raise a sou, having no security to offer. This conversation took place in front of the Bourse, where she was about to speculate with her savings. One was certain to find her at about three o'clock leaning against the rail, on the left, at the post-office side; it was there that she gave audience to individuals as sinister and shady as herself. As her brother was on the point of leaving her, she murmured regretfully, "Ah! if only you were unmarried! . . ." This reservation, of which he scrupled to enquire the exact and complete meaning, made Saccard singularly reflective.

Months passed, war was declared in the Crimea. Paris, unmoved by a war so distant, threw itself with growing ardour into speculation and the commerce of harlots. Saccard stood by, gnawing his fists, as he watched this increasing mania which he had foreseen.

The hammers beating the gold on the anvils of this gigantic forge gave him shocks of fury and impatience. So tense were his intellect and his will, that he lived in a dream, like a sleep-walker stepping along the edge of a roof under the influence of a fixed idea. He was surprised, therefore, and irritated, one evening to find Angèle ill in bed. His home life, regular as clock-work, was upset, and this exasperated him like a thought-out spitefulness of Fate. Poor Angèle complained gently; she had caught a chill. When the doctor came, he appeared very anxious; he told the husband on the landing that his wife had inflammation of the lungs, and that he could not answer for her recovery. From that moment the clerk nursed the sick woman without any feeling of anger; he no longer went to his office, he stayed by her side, watching her with an indescribable look on his face, whenever she lay asleep, flushed and panting with fever. Mme. Sidonie found time, notwithstanding the overwhelming nature of her work, to call every evening and make decoctions which she maintained to be sovereign in their effects. To all her other professions she added that of a heaven-born sick-nurse, taking an interest in sufferings, in remedies, in the broken-hearted conversations that linger round death-beds. She seemed to have taken a tender liking for Angèle; she had a way of loving women, with a thousand caresses, doubtless because of the pleasure they gave to men; she treated them with the delicate attention that merchants bestow upon the more precious of their wares, calling them "Pretty one, sweetheart," cooing to them, and

behaving with the transports of a lover in the presence of his mistress. And though Angèle was one of those out of whom there was nothing to be made, yet she cajoled her like the others, on principle. When the young wife took to her bed, Mme. Sidonie's effusions became tearful, she filled the silent chamber with her devotedness. Her brother watched her moving about, his lips tight, as though crushed with silent grief.

The illness grew worse. One evening the doctor informed them that the patient would not live through the night. Mme. Sidonie had come early, preoccupied, watching Aristide and Angèle with her watery eyes, illumined by momentary flashes of fire. When the doctor was gone, she lowered the lamp, and there was a great hush. Death entered slowly into the hot, moist room, where the uneven breathing of the dying woman sounded like the spasmodic ticking of a clock that is running down. Mme. Sidonie desisted from her potions, letting the illness take its course. She sat down before the fire-place, near her brother, who was poking the fire with a feverish hand, throwing involuntary glances the while towards the bed. Then, as though unnerved by the closeness of the atmosphere, he withdrew into the adjoining room; little Clotilde, who had been shut in there, was playing with her doll, very quietly, on a fragment of carpet. His daughter was smiling to him, when Mme. Sidonie, gliding up behind him, drew him to a corner, speaking low. The door remained standing open. They could hear the faint rattle in Angèle's throat.

"Your poor wife . . . ." the agent sobbed out. "I fear it will soon be over. You heard what the doctor said?"

Saccard made no answer, but dismally bowed his head.

"She was a good soul," continued the other, speaking as though Angèle were already dead. "You may find many richer women, and more fashionable women; but you will never find another heart like hers."

Seeing her stop, wipe her eyes, and seek an excuse for changing the subject, Saccard asked her, simply:

"Have you anything to tell me?"

"Yes, I have been working for you, in the matter you know of, and I think I have found . . . . But at such a moment. . . . Believe me, my heart is broken."

She went on wiping her eyes. Saccard let her have her way quietly, without opening his mouth. Then she came to the point.

"There is a young girl whom her people want to see married at once. The sweet child has had a misfortune. She has an aunt who would be prepared to make a sacrifice . . . ."

She interrupted herself, she had never ceased lamenting, weeping out her words, as though still bewailing poor Angèle. Her object was to make her brother lose patience, and to compel him to question her, so that she should not have all the responsibility of the offer which she had come to make to him. And in fact the clerk was seized with an unreasoning irritation.

"Come, out with it!" he said. "Why do they want to marry this girl?"

"She had just left school," continued the agent, in a dismal voice, "and a man seduced her, in the country, where she was staying with the relations of one of her school-fellows. The father has just discovered her condition. He wanted to kill her. The aunt, in order to save the dear child, became her accomplice, and between the two of them they made up a story and told the father that the guilty one was a man of honour whose one desire was to atone for his momentary offence."

"In that case," said Saccard, in a tone of surprise and seeming annoyance, "the man in the country is going to marry the girl?"

"No, he can't, he is a married man."

A pause ensued. The rattle in Angèle's throat sounded more painfully in the quivering atmosphere. Little Clotilde had ceased playing; she looked up at Madame Sidonie and her father, with her great pensive child-eyes, as though she had understood their conversation. Saccard began to put brief questions:

"How old is this young girl?"

"Nineteen."

"How long has she been in the family way?"

"Three months. It is sure to be a miscarriage."

"And is the family rich and respectable?"

"They belong to the old-fashioned middle-class. The father used to be a magistrate. They are very well-to-do."

"What would this sacrifice of the aunt's amount to?"

"A hundred thousand francs."

There was another pause. Mme. Sidonie had ceased snivelling; she was doing business now, her voice assumed the metallic tones of a second-hand clothes-woman haggling over a bargain. Her brother took a sidelong glance at her, and added, with some hesitation:

"And you, what do you want out of it?"

"We shall see later on," she replied. "You can do something for me in your turn."

She waited a few seconds; and as he did not speak, she asked him straight out:

"Well, have you made up your mind? Those poor women are at their wits' end. They want to prevent an outburst. They have promised to give up the culprit's name to the father to-morrow . . . . If you accept, I will send them your card by a messenger."

Saccard seemed to wake from a dream; he started, and turned timorously towards the next room, where he thought he had heard a slight noise.

"But I can't," he said, with anguish in his voice, "you well know I can't . . . ."

Mme. Sidonie looked at him fixedly, with a cold and scornful gaze. All his Rougon blood, all his eager covetousness, rushed to his throat. He took a visiting-card from his pocket-book, and gave it to his sister, who put it in an envelope, after carefully scratching out the address. Then she went down the stairs. It was barely nine o'clock.

Left alone, Saccard went to the window and

pressed his forehead against the icy panes. He forgot himself so far as to beat a tattoo with his fingers on the glass. But the night was so black, the outer darkness hung in such strange masses, that he experienced a feeling of uneasiness, and returned to the room where Angèle lay dying. He had forgotten her; he received a terrible shock on finding her half raised up against her pillows; her eyes stood wide open, a flush of life seemed to have returned to her cheeks and lips. Little Clotilde, still nursing her doll, was seated on the edge of the bed; as soon as her father's back was turned, she had quickly slipped back into that room from which she had been removed, and to which all her happy childish curiosity attracted her. Saccard, his head full of his sister's recital, saw his dream dashed to the ground. A hideous thought must have shone from his eyes. Angèle, seized with terror, tried to throw herself back into bed, against the wall; but death came, this awakening in agony was the last flicker of the expiring lamp. The dying woman was unable to move; she sank back, keeping her eyes fixed wide open upon her husband, as though to watch his every movement. Saccard, who had dreaded a resurrection, a devil's device of destiny to keep him in penury, was reassured on seeing that the wretched woman had not an hour to live. He now felt nothing but intolerable uneasiness. Angèle's eyes told him that she had overheard her husband's conversation with Mme. Sidonie, and that she feared he would strangle her if she did not die sufficiently quickly. And her eyes still retained the terrified amazement of a sweet and in-

offensive nature that learns at the last moment the infamy of this world, and shudders at the thought of the long years passed side by side with a miscreant. Little by little her look softened; she was no longer afraid, she seemed to find an excuse for the wretch as she thought of the desperate struggle he had so long maintained against Fate. Saccard, followed by the dying woman's gaze, in which he read so deep a reproach, leant against the furniture for support, sought the dark corners of the room. Then, faltering, he made as though to drive away the nightmare that was maddening him, and stepped forward into the light of the lamp. But Angèle signed to him not to speak. And she continued to look at him with her look of terror-stricken anguish, to which was now added a promise of forgiveness. Then he stooped to take Clotilde in his arms and carry her into the other room. She forbade him this, too, with a movement of her lips. She insisted that he should stay there. She expired gently, without removing her gaze from him, and, as her sight grew dimmed, that gaze became more and more gentle. At the last breath she forgave him. She died as she had lived, colourlessly, effacing herself in death as she had effaced herself during life. Saccard stood shivering before those dead eyes, still open, which continued to follow him in their immobility. Little Clotilde nursed her doll on the edge of the sheets, gently, so as not to awaken her mother.

When Mme. Sidonie returned, it was all over. With the trick of the fingers of a woman used to this operation, she closed Angèle's eyes, to Saccard's

intense relief. Then, after putting the little one to bed, she deftly arranged the mortuary chamber. When she had lit two candles on the chest of drawers, and carefully drawn the sheet to meet the chin of the corpse, she threw a glance of satisfaction around her, and stretched herself out in an easy-chair, where she slumbered till daybreak. Saccard spent the night in the next room, writing out the announcements of the death. He interrupted himself from time to time, forgetting himself, and jotted down columns of figures on scraps of paper.

On the evening of the funeral, Mme. Sidonie carried off Saccard to her entresol. There great resolutions were come to. The clerk decided to send little Clotilde to one of his brothers, Pascal Rougon, a doctor who led a solitary life at Plassans, sunk in research, and who had frequently offered to take his niece to enliven his silent scientific home. Mme. Sidonie next gave him to understand that he must no longer remain in the Rue Saint-Jacques. She would take an elegant set of furnished rooms for him for a month, somewhere round about the Hôtel de Ville; she would try and find some rooms in a private house, so that the furniture might seem to belong to him. As to the chattels in the Rue Saint-Jacques, they would be sold, so as to efface the last traces of the past. He could use the money in buying himself a wedding outfit and some decent clothes. Three days later Clotilde was handed over to an old lady who just happened to be going to the South. And Aristide Saccard, exultant and rosy-cheeked, fattened already in three days by the first

smiles of Fortune, occupied in the Marais, in the Rue Payenne, in a severe and respectable house, a smart five-roomed flat, which he perambulated in embroidered slippers. They were the rooms of a young abbé, who had left suddenly for Italy and had sent instructions to his housekeeper to let them. This woman was a friend of Mme. Sidonie, who affected the cloth a little; she loved priests with the love she bestowed on women, instinctively, establishing, possibly, a certain subtle relationship between cassocks and silk skirts. From that time Saccard was prepared; he had thought out his part with exquisite art; he awaited without flinching the difficulties and niceties of the situation he had accepted.

On the hideous night of Angèle's last agony, Madame Sidonie had faithfully related, in few words, the case of the Béraud family. Its head, M. Béraud du Châtel, a tall old man of sixty, was the last representative of an ancient middle-class family, whose pedigree went further back than that of certain noble houses. One of his ancestors was the friend of Étienne Marcel. In '93 his father had died on the scaffold, after welcoming the Republic with all the enthusiasm of a burgess of Paris in whose veins flowed the revolutionary blood of the city. He himself was a Republican of ancient Sparta, whose dream was a reign of universal justice and sound liberty. Grown old in the magistracy, where he had contracted a professional inflexibility and severity, he had resigned his chairmanship in 1851, at the time of the Coup d'État, after refusing to take

part in one of those mixed commissions which tended to dishonour French justice. Since that time he had been living alone in retirement in his house on the Île Saint-Louis, situated at the extremity of the island, almost facing the Hôtel Lambert. His wife had died young. Some secret tragedy, whose wound remained unhealed, added still further to the gloom of the magistrate's countenance. He was already the father of an eight-year-old daughter, Renée, when his wife expired in giving birth to a second. The latter, who was called Christine, was taken charge of by a sister of M. Béraud du Châtel, the wife of Aubertot the notary. Renée went to a convent. Madame Aubertot, who had no children, took a maternal fondness for Christine, whom she brought up by her side. On her husband's death, she brought back the little one to its father, and continued to live with the silent old man and the smiling, fair-haired child. Renée was forgotten at her school. During the holidays she filled the house with such an uproar that her aunt heaved a great sigh of relief when she had at last escorted her back to the ladies of the Visitation, where she had been a boarder since her eighth year. She did not leave the convent until she was nineteen, and went straight to spend the fine season at the home of her friend Adeline, whose parents owned a beautiful estate in the Nivernais. When she returned in October, her Aunt Élisabeth was surprised to find her serious and profoundly melancholy. One evening she discovered her stifling her sobs in her pillow, writhing on her bed in a paroxysm of uncontrollable grief. In

the unconstraint of her despair the girl told her a heart-rending story: how a man of forty, rich, married — his wife, a young and charming woman, was there—had violated her in a field, without her daring or knowing how to defend herself. This confession terrified Aunt Élisabeth; she accused herself, as though she felt herself to be to blame; her preference for Christine made her deeply unhappy; she thought that, had she kept Renée also beside her, the poor child would not have succumbed. Henceforth, in order to drive away this exquisite remorse, which was rendered still more acute by the tenderness of her nature, she sustained the erring one; she bore the brunt of the anger of the father, to whom they both revealed the horrible truth by the very excess of their precautions; she invented, in the bewilderment of her solicitude, this strange project of matrimony, which to her idea would settle the whole affair, appease the father, and restore Renée to the world of honest women, and she refused to perceive its shameful side or foresee its disastrous consequences.

Nobody ever knew how Madame Sidonie had got wind of this good bit of business. The honour of the Bérauds had been dragged about in her basket among the protested bills of every strumpet in Paris. Once she knew the story, she almost forced her brother, whose wife lay dying, upon them. Aunt Élisabeth ended by believing that she was under an obligation to this gentle, humble lady, who was devoting herself to the unhappy Renée to the degree of finding a husband for her in her own family. The first interview between the aunt and Saccard took place on

the entresol in the Rue du Faubourg-Poissonière. The clerk, who had arrived by the carriage-entrance in the Rue Papillon, realized, when he saw Madame Aubertot coming through the shop and the little staircase, the ingenious arrangement of the two entrances. He was full of tact and propriety. He treated the marriage as a matter of business, but in the fashion of a man of the world settling his debts of honour. Aunt Élisabeth was far less at ease than he; she stammered, she had not the courage to mention the hundred thousand francs she had promised him.

It was he who first broached the question of money, with the manner of a solicitor discussing a client's case. According to him a hundred thousand francs was a ridiculous sum for the husband of Mademoiselle Renée to bring into settlement. He laid a little stress on the "mademoiselle." M. Béraud du Châtel would still more despise a poor son-in-law: he would accuse him of having seduced his daughter for the sake of her fortune; perhaps it might even occur to him to make some private enquiries. Startled and dismayed by Saccard's calm and polite phrases, Madame Aubertot lost her head and consented to double the amount when he declared that he would never dare to propose for Renée with less than two hundred thousand francs in his pocket; he did not wish to be taken for a contemptible fortune-hunter. The good lady departed quite confused, not knowing what to think of a man capable of so much indignation, and yet willing to accept a bargain of such a nature.

This first interview was followed by an official visit which Aunt Élisabeth paid Saccard at his rooms in the Rue Payenne. This time she came in the name of M. Béraud. The ex-magistrate had refused to see "that man," as he called his daughter's seducer, so long as he was not married to Renée, to whom furthermore he had also forbidden his house. Madame Aubertot had full powers of treaty. She seemed pleased with the clerk's luxurious surroundings; she had feared that the brother of that Madame Sidonie, with her draggled skirts, might be a disreputable-looking person. He received her swathed in a delightful dressing-gown. It was at the time when the adventurers of the 2 Décembre, after paying their debts, flung their worn boots and frayed coats into the sewers, shaved their eight days' beards, and became respectable men. Saccard was at last to join the band; he cleaned his nails and washed exclusively with powders and perfumes of inestimable value. He made himself gallant; he changed his tactics and shewed himself wonderfully disinterested. When the old lady began to talk of the contract, he made a gesture as though to say what did he mind. For a week past he had been studying the Code, pondering this serious question on which would depend his future liberty of action as a sharp business practitioner.

"I beg you," he said, "let us hear no more of this disagreeable question of money . . . . My opinion is that Mademoiselle Renée should remain mistress of her fortune and I master of mine. The notary will put that right."

Aunt Élisabeth approved of this manner of looking at things; she trembled lest this fellow, whose iron grip she could vaguely perceive, should wish to thrust his fingers into her niece's dowry. She next entered into the matter of this dowry.

"My brother's fortune," she said, "consists mainly of houses and landed property. He is not the man to punish his daughter by reducing the share he intended for her. He will give her an estate in the Sologne valued at three hundred thousand francs, in addition to a house in Paris which is worth about two hundred thousand francs."

Saccard was dazzled; he had expected no such amount; he turned half away so as to hide the rush of blood that came to his face.

"That will make five hundred thousand francs," continued the aunt;" but I am bound to add that the Sologne property yields only two per cent."

He smiled, repeating his disinterested gesture, implying that that could not concern him, as he declined to interfere with his wife's property. He sat in his arm-chair in an adorable attitude of indifference, absent-minded, balancing his slipper on his foot, seeming to listen from sheer politeness. Mme. Aubertot, with her simple-minded good-nature, spoke with difficulty, picking her words so as not to wound him. She continued:

"And lastly, I want to make Renée a present myself. I have no children, my property will some day revert to my nieces, and I am not going to close my hands now because one of them is in trouble. Both their wedding-presents were ready for them.

Renée's consists of some extensive plots of land up Charonne way, which I can safely value at two hundred thousand francs. Only . . . ."

At the word land Saccard started slightly. In spite of his assumed indifference he was listening intently. Aunt Élisabeth became confused, apparently at a loss for the right expression, and continued, blushing:

"Only, I wish the ownership of this land to be settled on Renée's first child. You understand my reason. I do not wish this child ever to be of any expense to you. In the event of its dying, Renée would become the sole owner."

He made no sign, but his knit brows revealed great inward preoccupation. The mention of the land at Charonne had aroused within him a world of ideas. Mme. Aubertot feared she had offended him by speaking of Renée's child, and she remained abashed, not knowing how to follow up the conversation.

"You have not told me in what street the house worth two hundred thousand francs stands," he said, resuming his smiling, genial air.

"In the Rue de la Pépinière," she replied; "almost at the corner of the Rue d'Astorg."

This simple sentence produced a decided effect on him. He could no longer conceal his delight; he drew up his chair, and with his Provençal volubility, in coaxing tones:

"Dear lady," he said, "have we not said enough, need we continue to talk of this confounded money? . . . . See here, I want to tell you my story quite

frankly, for I should be most unhappy if I failed to deserve your regard. I lost my wife recently, I have two children left on my hands, I am a sensible and practical man. In marrying your niece I am doing good all round. If you retain any prejudice against me, you will lose it later on when I have dried everyone's tears and made the fortune of all my family. Success is a golden flame that purifies everything. I want M. Béraud himself to shake me by the hand and thank me . . . ."

He lost himself. He talked on for a long while in the same bantering strain, whose cynicism from time to time shone through his genial air. He dragged in his brother, the Deputy, his father the receiver of taxes at Plassans. He ended by making a conquest of Aunt Élisabeth who, with involuntary joy, saw the tragedy under which she had been suffering for the past month ending, under this clever man's fingers, in a comedy that was almost hilarious. It was arranged that they should go to the notary the next day.

So soon as Madame Aubertot had gone, Saccard went to the Hôtel de Ville, and spent the day in turning over certain documents that he knew of. At the notary's he raised a difficulty, he said that as Renée's dowry consisted entirely of landed property, he feared it would give her a deal of worry, and that he thought it would be as well to sell the house in the Rue de la Pépinière in order to secure her an investment in the funds. Mme. Aubertot proposed to refer the matter to M. Béraud du Châtel, who continued to keep his room. Saccard went out again till the

evening. He went to the Rue de la Pépinière, he walked about Paris with the preoccupied air of a general on the eve of a decisive battle. The next day Mme. Aubertot declared that M. Béraud du Châtel left the whole matter in her hands. The contract was drawn up on the lines already discussed. Saccard brought in two hundred thousand francs, Renée's dowry was the Sologne property and the house in the Rue de la Pépinière, which she agreed to sell; and further, in the case of the death of her first child, she was to be the sole owner of the land at Charonne given her by her aunt. The contract was in accordance with the system of separate estates by which the husband and wife retain the entire management of their respective fortunes. Aunt Élisabeth followed the notary attentively, and seemed contented with this system, whose provisions apparently assured her niece's independence by placing her fortune beyond the reach of any attempts. Saccard smiled vaguely as he saw the good lady nodding her approval of each clause. The marriage was fixed to take place at the earliest possible date.

When all was settled, Saccard paid a ceremonial visit to his brother Eugène to announce his marriage with Mlle. Renée Béraud du Châtel. This masterstroke took the deputy by surprise. As he made no attempt to conceal his astonishment, the clerk said:

"You told me to look, and I looked until I found."

Eugène, bewildered at first, began to get a glimpse of the truth. And in a charming tone he said:

"Come, you're a clever fellow . . . . I suppose

you have come to ask me to be your witness. You may rely on me . . . . If necessary, I will bring the whole of the Right of the Corps Législatif to your wedding; that would launch you nicely. . . ."

Then, as he had opened the door, he lowered his voice to add:

"I say . . . . I don't want to compromise myself too much just now, we have a very tough bill to pass . . . . The lady is not very far gone, I hope?"

Saccard gave him such a savage look that Eugène said to himself, as he shut the door:

"That's a joke that would cost me dear if I were not a Rougon."

The marriage was solemnised in the Church of Saint-Louis-en-l'Île. Saccard and Renée did not meet till the eve of that great day. The introduction took place early in the evening, in a low reception-room at the Hôtel Béraud. They examined each other curiously. Renée, since her marriage had been arranged, had regained her light-headedness, her madcap ways. She was a tall girl of exquisite and tempestuous beauty, that had grown up at random through her school-girl caprices. She thought Saccard small and ugly, but ugly in a restless and intelligent way that she did not dislike; and moreover, he was perfect in manner and deportment. As for him, he made a little grimace at the first sight of her; she doubtless struck him as too tall, taller than he was. They exchanged a few words, free from embarrassment. Had the father been present, he might readily have believed that they had long known each other, and that they had a common fault in their past lives. Aunt

Élisabeth, who was present at the interview, blushed in their stead.

On the day after the wedding, which the presence of Eugène Rougon, whom a recent speech had brought to the forefront, magnified into an event in the Île Saint-Louis, the newly-married couple were at length admitted to the presence of Monsieur Béraud du Châtel. Renée shed tears on finding her father aged, graver, and sadder. Saccard, whom up to that point nothing had put out of countenance, was frozen by the chill and gloom of the room, by the sombre austerity of the tall old man, whose piercing eye seemed to penetrate to the depths of his conscience. The ex-magistrate kissed his daughter slowly on the forehead, as though to tell her that he forgave her, and turning to his son-in-law:

"Monsieur," he said, simply, "we have suffered greatly, I trust you will give us reason to forget the wrong you have done us."

He held out his hand. But Saccard remained timorous. He thought how, if M. Béraud du Châtel had not given way under the tragic sorrow of Renée's shame, he might with a glance, with a gesture, have annulled Madame Sidonie's manœuvres. The latter, after bringing her brother and Aunt Élisabeth together, had prudently effaced herself. She had not even come to the wedding. Saccard adopted an attitude of great frankness towards the old man, having read in his face a look of surprise at finding his daughter's seducer ugly, little, and forty years of age. The newly-married couple were compelled to spend the first nights at the Hôtel Béraud. Christine had

been sent away two months since, so that this child of fourteen might have no suspicion of the drama that was being enacted in this house, peaceful and serene as a convent. When she returned home, she stood aghast before her sister's husband, whom she too thought old and ugly. Renée alone seemed to take but little notice of her husband's age or his mean aspect. She treated him without contempt as without affection, with absolute tranquillity, through which was visible an occasional glimmer of ironical disdain. Saccard strutted about, made himself at home, and really succeeded, by his frankness and vivacity, in gradually winning everybody's good will. When they took their departure, in order to instal themselves in an imposing flat in a new house in the Rue de Rivoli, M. Béraud du Châtel had lost his look of astonishment, and Christine had taken to playing with her brother-in-law as with a schoolfellow. Renée's pregnancy was at that time four months advanced; her husband was on the point of sending her to the country, proposing afterwards to lie as to the child's age, when, as Madame Sidonie had foretold, she had a miscarriage. She had so tightly laced herself to dissimulate her condition, which was moreover concealed under the fulness of her skirts, that she was compelled to keep her bed for some weeks. He was enchanted with the adventure; Fortune was at last on his side; he had made a golden bargain: a splendid dowry, a wife of a beauty that should be worth a decoration to him within six months, and not the least encumbrance. He had received two hundred

thousand francs to give his name to a fœtus which its mother would not even look at. From that moment his thoughts began to turn affectionately towards the Charonne property. But for the time being he devoted all his attention to a speculation which was to be the basis of his fortune.

Notwithstanding the high standing of his wife's family, he did not immediately resign his post as a surveyor of roads. He talked of work that had to be finished, of an occupation that had to be sought for. As a matter of fact he wished to remain till the end on the battle-field upon which he was venturing his first stake. He felt at home, he was able to cheat more at his ease.

His plan of fortune was simple and practical. Now that he had more money than he had ever hoped for in hand to begin his operations, he reckoned on putting his designs into execution on a large scale. He had all Paris at his fingers' ends; he knew that the shower of gold which was beating down upon the walls would fall more heavily every day. Clever people had but to open their pockets. He had enlisted himself among the clever ones by reading the future in the offices of the Hôtel de Ville. His duties had taught him what may be stolen in the buying and selling of houses and ground. He was well up in every classical swindle: he knew how you sell for a million what has cost you five hundred thousand francs; how you acquire the right of rifling the treasury of the State, which smiles and closes its eyes; how, when throwing a boulevard across the belly of an old quarter, you juggle with six-storied houses amidst the unanimous applause

of your dupes. And in these still clouded days, when the canker of speculation was but at its period of incubation, what made a formidable gambler of him was that he saw further than his chiefs themselves into the stone-and-plaster future reserved for Paris. He had ferreted to such an extent, collected so many clues, that he could have prophesied the appearance the new neighbourhoods would offer in 1870. Sometimes, in the street, he would look at certain houses in a curious way, as though they were acquaintances whose destiny, known to him alone, deeply affected him.

Two months before Angèle's death, he had taken her, on a Sunday, to the Buttes Montmartre. The poor woman loved dining at a restaurant; she was delighted whenever, after a long walk, he sat her down at a table in some hostelry on the outskirts of the town. On this particular day they dined at the top of the hill, in a restaurant whose windows looked out over Paris, over that sea of houses with blue roofs, like surging billows that filled the vast horizon. Their table was placed at one of the windows. The sight of the roofs of Paris enlivened Saccard. At dessert he called for a bottle of Burgundy. He smiled into space, he was unusually gallant. And his looks always returned amorously to that living, seething ocean, from which issued the deep voice of the crowd. It was autumn; beneath the great pale sky the city lay listless in a soft and tender gray, pierced here and there with dark patches of foliage that resembled the broad leaves of water-lilies floating on a lake; the sun was setting behind a red cloud, and,

Chapter II

The ex-magistrate kissed his daughter slowly on the forehead, as though to tell her that he forgave her, and turning to his son-in-law:

"Monsieur," he said, simply, "we have suffered greatly, I trust you will give us reason to forget the wrong you have done us."

while the background was filled with a light haze, a shower of gold dust, of golden dew, fell on the right bank of the river, in the neighbourhood of the Madeleine and the Tuileries. It was like an enchanted corner in a city of the "Arabian Nights," with emerald trees, sapphire roofs, ruby weathercocks. There came a moment when a ray of sunlight, gliding from between two clouds, was so resplendent that the houses seemed to flare up and melt like an ingot of gold in a crucible.

"Oh! look," said Saccard, with a laugh like a child's, "it is raining twenty-franc pieces in Paris!"

Angèle joined in the laughter, saying that that sort of pieces was not easy to pick up. But her husband had stood up, and leaning on the handrail of the window:

"That is the Vendôme Column, is it not, glittering over there? . . . . There, more to the right, you can see the Madeleine . . . . A fine district, where there is much to be done. . . . Ah! now it is all going to blaze up! Do you see? . . . . You would think the whole neighbourhood was boiling in a chemist's retort."

His voice became eager and agitated. The comparison he had hit upon seemed to strike him greatly. He had been drinking Burgundy, he forgot himself; stretching out his arm to show Paris to Angèle, who was leaning by his side, he went on:

"Yes, yes, I said so, more than one district will be melted down, and gold will stick to the fingers of those who heat and stir the mortar. That great noodle of a Paris! see how big it is, and how quietly

it goes to sleep! What fools, those large towns! It has no suspicion of the army of picks that will fall upon it one of these fine mornings, and certain houses in the Rue d'Anjou would not shine so brightly in the sunset, if they knew that they have only three or four years to live."

Angèle thought her husband was joking. He sometimes showed a predilection for colossal and disquieting pleasantries. She laughed, but with a vague terror, at the sight of this little man standing erect over the recumbent giant at his feet, and shaking his fist at it while ironically pursing his lips.

"They have begun already," he continued. "But it is nothing much yet. Look down there, over by the Halles, they have cut Paris into four . . . ."

And with his hand spread out, open and sharp-edged as a cutlass, he made the movement of separating the city into four parts.

"You mean the Rue de Rivoli and the new boulevard they are building?" asked his wife.

"Yes, the great transept of Paris, as they call it. They're clearing away the buildings round the Louvre and the Hôtel de Ville. That's mere child's play! It serves to awaken the public's appetite . . . . When the first network is finished the fun will begin. The second network will pierce the city in every direction so as to connect the suburbs with the first. The remains will disappear in clouds of plaster . . . . Look, just follow my hand. From the Boulevard du Temple to the Barrière du Trône, that's one cutting; then on this side another, from the Madeleine to the

Plaine Monceau: and a third cutting this way, another that way, a cutting there, one further on, cuttings on every side, Paris slashed with sabre cuts, its veins opened, giving sustenance to a hundred thousand navvies and bricklayers, traversed by splendid military roads which will bring the forts into the very heart of the old quarters of the town."

Night was falling. His dry, nervous hand kept cutting through space. Angèle shivered slightly before this living knife, those iron fingers mercilessly slicing up the boundless mass of dusky roofs. During the last moment the haze of the horizon had been descending slowly from the heights, and she fancied she could hear, beneath the gloom that was gathering in the hollows, a distant cracking, as though her husband's hand had really made the cuttings he spoke of, splitting up Paris from one end to the other, severing beams, crushing masonry, leaving behind it long and hideous wounds of crumbling walls. The smallness of this hand, hovering pitilessly over a gigantic prey, ended by becoming disquieting; and as, without effort, it tore asunder the entrails of the enormous city, it seemed to assume a strange reflex of steel in the blue of the twilight.

"There is to be a third network," continued Saccard after a pause, as though talking to himself; "that one is too far off yet, I do not see it so distinctly. I have heard only a little about it . . . . But there will be a sheer orgie, a bacchanal of millions, Paris drunk and overwhelmed!"

He lapsed into silence, his eyes ardently fixed upon the town, over which the shadows were falling

more and more deeply. He was apparently interrogating that too-distant future which escaped him. Then night fell, the city became confused, one heard it breathing heavily, like the sea when the eye no longer distinguishes anything but the pale crest of the billows. Here and there a wall still stood out white; and the yellow flames of the gas-jets pierced the darkness one by one, like stars lighting up in the blackness of a stormy sky.

Angèle shook off her feeling of uneasiness, and took up the jest that her husband had made at dessert.

"Well," she said, with a smile, "there has been a fine shower of those twenty-franc pieces! The people of Paris are counting them now. Look at the great heaps they are laying out at our feet!"

She pointed to the streets that run down opposite the Buttes Montmartre, whose gas-lights seemed to be heaping up their specks of gold in two rows.

"And over there," she cried, pointing with her finger to a swarm of stars, "that must be the treasury."

The jest made Saccard laugh. They stayed a few moments longer at the window, enchanted with this torrent of "twenty-franc pieces," which had ended by setting light to the whole of Paris. On the road home from Montmartre the surveyor of roads no doubt repented of having spoken so freely. He put it down to the Burgundy, and begged his wife not to repeat the "nonsense" he had been talking; he wanted, he said, to be a serious person.

For a long time past Saccard had been studying

these three arteries of streets and boulevards, of which he had so far forgotten himself as to lay bare the plan to Angèle with tolerable correctness. When the latter died, he was not sorry to think that she bore with her into the grave his chatter on the occasion of the Montmartre expedition. There lay his fortune, in those famous gaps which his hand had cut out in the heart of Paris, and he had made up his mind to communicate his idea to nobody, well knowing that on the day of the spoil there would be crows enough hovering over the disembowelled city. His first intention had been to get hold cheaply of some building which he would know beforehand to be condemned to speedy demolition, and to realize a big profit by obtaining substantial compensation. He might, perhaps, have gone so far as to make the attempt without a sou, buying the house on credit, and only receiving the difference, as on the Bourse, when his second marriage, bringing him in a premium of two hundred thousand francs, fixed and enlarged his design. Now, his calculations were made; he would buy the house in the Rue de la Pépinière from his wife through an intermediary, without allowing his own name to appear, and treble his outlay, thanks to the knowledge he had picked up in the corridors of the Hôtel de Ville, and to his pleasant relations with certain eminent persons of influence. The reason he started when Aunt Élisabeth told him where the house was situated was because this was right in the centre of the design for a thoroughfare which had not yet been talked of outside the private office of the Préfet of the Seine.

This thoroughfare would be swallowed up entirely by the Boulevard Malesherbes. It was an old scheme of Napoleon I, which they were now thinking of carrying out, "in order," said the serious people, "to give a normal outlet to districts lost behind a labyrinth of narrow streets on the slope of the hills that mark the outskirts of Paris." This official phrase did not, of course, admit the interest the Empire possessed in making the money dance, in organising those redoubtable excavations and building operations which gave the labouring classes no time to think. Saccard had ventured one day to consult, in the préfet's room, that famous plan of Paris on which "an august hand" had traced in red ink the principal thoroughfares of the second network. Those blood-red pen-strokes cut even deeper gashes into Paris than did Saccard's hand. The Boulevard Malesherbes, which pulled down some magnificent houses in the Rue d'Anjou and the Rue de la Ville-l'Évêque, and necessitated a large number of levelling works, was to be one of the first laid out. When Saccard went to look over the building in the Rue de la Pépinière, he thought of that autumn evening, of that dinner he had taken with Angèle on the Buttes Montmartre, during which, at sunset, so thick a shower of louis d'or had fallen on the Madeleine quarter. He smiled; he pictured to himself the radiant cloud as bursting over his own court-yard, and that he was on his way to pick up the twenty-franc pieces.

While Renée, luxuriously installed in the flat in the Rue de Rivoli, in the centre of that new Paris, one of whose queens she was destined to

become, thought out her future dresses and took her first steps in the life of a woman of fashion, her husband was devoutly maturing his first great scheme. He began by purchasing from her the house in the Rue de la Pépinière, thanks to the intermediary of a certain Larsonneau, whom he had come across ferreting like himself in the offices of the Hôtel de Ville. Larsonneau, however, had been stupid enough to allow himself to be caught one day when he was prying into the préfet's private drawers. He had set up as an agent at the end of a dark, damp court at the foot of the Rue Saint-Jacques. His pride, his greed suffered torments there. He found himself in the same position as Saccard before his marriage; he too, he would say, had invented "a five-franc piece machine"; only he lacked the necessary funds to turn his invention to profit. A hint was sufficient to enable him to come to an understanding with his former colleague; and he did his part of the work so well that he obtained the house for one hundred and fifty thousand francs. Renée was already, before many months had elapsed, in great need of money. The husband did not appear in the matter except to authorize his wife to sell. When the sale was effected, she asked him to invest a hundred thousand francs for her, handing it to him with full confidence, so as no doubt to touch him and make him close his eyes to the fact that she was keeping fifty thousand francs back. He smiled knowingly; he had reckoned on her squandering her money; those fifty thousand francs, which were about to disappear in jewellery and lace, were calculated to bring him in cent. per

cent. He carried his honesty so far, so well satisfied was he with his first transaction, as really to invest Renée's hundred thousand francs and hand her the share certificates. His wife had no power to transfer them; he was certain of being able to lay his hand on them if ever he happened to want them.

"My dear, this will do for your dress," he said gallantly.

When he had obtained possession of the house, he had the ingenuity to have it sold over again, twice in one month, to men of straw, increasing the purchase price each time. The last purchaser paid no less than three hundred thousand francs for it. Meanwhile Larsonneau alone appeared as the representative of the successive landlords, and worked the tenants. He pitilessly refused to renew the leases unless they consented to a formidable increase of rent. The tenants, who had an inkling of the approaching expropriation, were in despair; they ended by agreeing to the increase, especially when Larsonneau added, with a conciliatory air, that this increase should remain a fictitious one during the first five years. As for the tenants who were unaccommodating, they were replaced by creatures who received the apartment for nothing and signed anything they were asked to; in their case there was a double profit: the rent was raised, and the compensation due to the tenant for his lease went to Saccard. Madame Sidonie was so good as to assist her brother by setting up a pianoforte-agency in one of the shops on the ground-floor. It was then that Saccard and Larsonneau, seized with the fever of gain, went

rather too far: they concocted business-books, they forged letters, so as to establish a trade in pianos on an immense footing. They scribbled away together for many nights. Worked in this fashion, the house trebled in value. Thanks to the last sale, thanks to the increase in the rents, to the fictitious tenants, and to Madame Sidonie's business, it was in a condition to be valued at five hundred thousand francs before the compensations commission.

The machinery of expropriation, of that powerful piece of mechanism that for fifteen years turned Paris topsy-turvy, breathing fortune and ruin, is of the simplest. So soon as a new thoroughfare is decided upon, the surveyors of roads draw up the plan in separate sections and appraise the buildings. As a rule, in the case of houses let in apartments, they add up the total amount of the rents, after making enquiries, and are thus enabled to fix upon the approximate value. The compensations commission, consisting of members of the Municipal Council, always make an offer lower than this sum, knowing that the interested parties will claim more, and that there will be a concession on both sides. When they are unable to come to terms, the case is taken before a jury, which decides authoritatively upon the offer of the town and the claim of the evicted landlord or tenant.

Saccard, who had remained at the Hôtel de Ville for the decisive moment, had for one instant the impudence to wish to have himself appointed when the works of the Boulevard Malesherbes were begun, and himself to appraise his house. But he was afraid

by so doing to paralyze his influence with the members of the compensations commission. He caused one of his colleagues to be chosen, a young man with a sweet smile, called Michelin, whose wife, an adorably pretty woman, occasionally called to apologize to her husband's chiefs for his absence, when he stayed away through ill-health. He was often ill. Saccard had noticed that the pretty Madame Michelin, who glided so humbly through the half-closed doorways, was omnipotent; Michelin obtained promotion at each illness, he made his career by taking to his bed. During one of his absences, when he was sending his wife almost every morning to the office to say how he was getting on, Saccard twice met him on the outer boulevards, smoking a cigar with the expression of rapt affection that never left him. This filled him with sympathy for this good young man, for that happy couple, so practical and so ingenious. He admired all "five-franc-piece machines" that were properly worked. When he had got Michelin appointed, he went and called on his charming wife, expressed a wish to introduce her to Renée, talked before her of his brother the deputy, the brilliant orator. Madame Michelin understood.

From that day forward her husband kept his choicest smiles for his colleague. The latter, who had no desire to take the worthy fellow into his confidence, contented himself with being present, as though casually, on the day when the other proceeded to value the house in the Rue de la Pépinière. He assisted him. Michelin, who had the most insignificant and the emptiest head imaginable, followed the

instructions of his wife, who had urged him to satisfy M. Saccard in all things. He suspected nothing, moreover; he thought the surveyor was in a hurry to see him finish his work so as to take him off to a café. The leases, the receipts for rent, Madame Sidonie's famous books, passed from his colleague's hands under his eyes without his even having time to verify the figures which the latter read aloud. Larsonneau was present, and treated his accomplice as a stranger.

"Come, put down five hundred thousand francs," Saccard ended by saying. "The house is worth more .... Hurry up; I believe there is going to be a change in the staff of the Hôtel de Ville, and I want to talk to you about it, so that you may let your wife know beforehand."

The business was thus carried through. But he still had fears. He dreaded lest the sum of five hundred thousand francs should seem rather excessive to the compensations commission for a house which was well known to be worth at most two hundred thousand. The formidable rise in house-property had not yet taken place. An enquiry would have caused him to run the risk of serious unpleasantness. He remembered his brother's words: "No flagrant scandal, or I'll exterminate you;" and he knew Eugène was the man to carry out his threat. It was a question of blindfolding those gentlemen of the commission, and ensuring their good will. He cast his eyes on two influential men, of whom he had made friends through his habit of saluting them in the corridors when he met them. The thirty-six mem-

bers of the Municipal Council were carefully selected by the Emperor himself, on the recommendation of the préfet, from among the senators, deputies, advocates, doctors, and great manufacturers, who prostrated themselves the most devoutly before the reigning power; but among them all, the fervour of the Baron Gouraud and of M. Toutin-Laroche more especially attracted the good will of the Tuileries.

The whole of the Baron Gouraud is comprised in this short biography: he was made a baron by Napoleon I as a reward for supplying damaged biscuits to the Grand Army, he was a peer successively under Louis XVIII, Charles X, and Louis-Philippe, and he was a senator under Napoleon III. He worshipped the throne, the four gilded boards covered with velvet; it mattered little to him what man sat upon it. With his enormous belly, his bovine face, his elephantine movements, he boasted a delightful rascality; he sold himself majestically, and committed the greatest infamies in the name of duty and conscience. But the man was yet more astonishing in his vices. Stories were current about him which could not be told above a whisper. In spite of his seventy-eight years, he flourished in the midst of the most monstrous debauchery. It was necessary on two occasions to hush up some dirty adventure, so that his embroidered senator's coat should not be dragged through the dock of the assize-court.

M. Toutin-Laroche, tall and thin, had invented a mixture of tallow and stearine for the manufacture of candles, and longed to enter the Senate. He clung to the Baron Gouraud like a leech; he rubbed up

against him with the vague idea that it would bring him luck. At bottom he was exceedingly practical; and had he come across a senator's seat for sale, he would have haggled fiercely over the price. The Empire was to bring into prominence this greedy nonentity, this narrow brain with its genius for industrial swindling. He was the first to sell his name to a shady company, one of those associations which sprouted like poisonous toadstools on the dunghill of imperial speculation. At that time one could see stuck on the walls a placard bearing these words in big black letters: "Société Générale of the Ports of Morocco," on which the name of M. Toutin-Laroche, with his title of municipal councillor, was displayed at the head of the list of members of the board of directors, each more unknown than the other. This method, which has since been abused, succeeded admirably; the shares were snapped up, although the question of the Ports of Morocco was not a very definite one, and the worthy people who brought their money were not themselves able to explain to what use it was to be put. The placard spoke magniloquently of commercial stations to be established along the Mediterranean. For two years past certain of the newspapers had been hallowing this imposing undertaking, which they declared to be more prosperous every quarter. In the Municipal Council M. Toutin-Laroche was considered an administrator of the first water; he was one of the clever heads of the place, and his bitter tyranny over his colleagues was equalled only by his devout self-effacement in the presence of the préfet.

He was now engaged upon the construction of a great financial company, the Crédit Viticole, a wine-growers' loan office, of which he spoke with a reticence and an air of solemnity that kindled the covetousness of the idiots around him.

Saccard secured the protection of these two personages by rendering them services whose importance he cleverly pretended to ignore. He introduced his sister to the baron at a time when the latter was mixed up in a very dirty scandal. He took her to see him under the pretence of soliciting his support in the favour of the dear woman, who had long been petitioning for an order for the supply of window-curtains to the Tuileries. But it so happened that when the surveyor of roads left them together, it was Madame Sidonie who promised the baron to negotiate with certain people who were clumsy enough not to have felt honoured by the friendship that a senator had condescended to shew to their child, a little girl of ten. Saccard took M. Toutin-Laroche in hand himself; he manœuvred so as to obtain an interview with him in the corridor, and led the conversation to the famous Crédit Viticole. After five minutes the great administrator, dazed and astounded at the astonishing things he heard, took the clerk familiarly by the arm and detained him for a full hour in the corridor. Saccard whispered in his ear some financial schemes of prodigious ingenuity. When M. Toutin-Laroche left him, he pressed his hand in a meaning way with a masonic wink of the eye.

"You shall be there," he murmured, "you must be there."

He surpassed himself throughout this business. He carried his foresight as far as not to make the Baron Gouraud and M. Toutin-Laroche accomplices of one another. He called upon them separately, dropped a word in their ear in favour of one of his friends who was about to be bought out in the Rue de la Pépinière; he was very careful to tell each of the two confederates that he would not mention this business to any other member of the commission, that it was very uncertain, but that he reckoned on all his good will.

The surveyor of roads was right in being apprehensive and in taking his precautions. When the report relating to his house came before the compensations commission, it just happened that one of the members lived in the Rue d'Astorg and knew the house. This member raised a protest against the figure of five hundred thousand francs which, according to him, should be reduced by one-half. Aristide had had the impudence to have seven hundred thousand francs put down in the claim. But that day M. Toutin-Laroche, who was generally very disagreeable to his colleagues, was in a still more truculent mood than usual. He grew angry, he took up the defence of the landlords.

"We are all of us landlords, messieurs," he cried. . . . . "The Emperor wishes to do things on a large scale, let us not haggle over trifles. . . . This house must be worth five hundred thousand francs; the amount was set down by one of our people, a clerk of the town. . . . Upon my word, one would think we

were living in a den of thieves; you will see that we shall end by suspecting one another."

The Baron Gouraud, sitting squat in his chair, looked from the corner of his eye, with an air of surprise, at M. Toutin-Laroche raising fire and flames on behalf of the landlord of the Rue de la Pépinière. He had a suspicion. But after all, as this violent outburst saved him the trouble of speaking, he began to nod his head slowly, as a sign of complete approval. The member from the Rue d'Astorg indignantly resisted, refusing to bow before the two tyrants of the commission in a matter in which he was more competent than those gentlemen. At that moment M. Toutin-Laroche, noticing the baron's marks of approval, hastily seized the report and said, curtly:

"Very well. We'll dispel your doubts. . . . If you will allow me, I will take the matter in hand, and the Baron Gouraud shall join me in the enquiry."

"Yes, yes," said the Baron gravely, "nothing underhand must be allowed to taint our decisions."

The report had already vanished within M. Toutin-Laroche's capacious pockets. The commission had to give way. As they went out on to the quay, the two confederates looked at each other without a smile. They felt themselves to be accomplices, and this added to their assurance. Two vulgar minds would have sought an explanation; these two continued to plead the cause of the landlords, as though they could still be overheard, and to deprecate the spirit of distrust that was filtering through everything. Just as they were about to separate:

"Ah, I was forgetting, my dear colleague," said the Baron, with a smile. "I am going into the country almost at once. It would be very kind of you to go and make this little enquiry without me . . . . And above all don't give me away, our friends complain that I take too many holidays."

"Be easy," replied M. Toutin-Laroche, "I shall go straight to the Rue de la Pépinière."

He went quietly to his own house, not without a touch of admiration for the baron, who had such a pretty way of unravelling a delicate position. He kept the report in his pocket, and at the next sitting he declared peremptorily, in the baron's name and his own, that they should split the difference between the offer of five hundred thousand and the claim of seven hundred thousand francs, and allow six hundred thousand. There was not the slightest opposition. The member from the Rue d'Astorg, who had no doubt thought it over, said with great good-nature that he had been mistaken: he thought it was the next house that was in question.

In this way did Aristide Saccard win his first victory. He quadrupled his outlay and secured two accomplices. One thing alone perturbed him; when he wanted to destroy Madame Sidonie's famous account-books, he was unable to find them. He hastened to Larsonneau, who boldly avowed that he had them and that he meant to keep them. The other showed no vexation; he suggested that he had only been anxious on account of his dear friend, who was much more compromised than himself by these entries, which were almost entirely in his hand-

writing, but that he was reassured so soon as he knew they were in his keeping. At heart he would have been delighted to strangle his "dear friend;" he remembered a particularly compromising document, a false inventory which he had been fool enough to draw up, and which he knew had been left in one of the ledgers. Larsonneau, handsomely remunerated, set up a business-agency in the Rue de Rivoli, where he had a suite of offices furnished as luxuriously as a courtesan's rooms. Saccard left the Hôtel de Ville and, being in command of considerable funds to work with, launched furiously into speculation, while Renée, in mad intoxication, filled Paris with the clatter of her equipages, the sparkle of her diamonds, the vertigo of her adorably-riotous existence.

Sometimes the husband and wife, those two feverish devotees of money and of pleasure, would penetrate the icy mists of the Île Saint-Louis. They felt as though they were entering a city of the dead.

The Hôtel Béraud, built about the beginning of the sixteenth century, was one of those square black, solemn edifices, with tall, narrow windows, which are numerous in the Marais, and are let to proprietors of schools, to manufacturers of aërated waters, and to bonders of wines and spirits. Only it was in admirable preservation. On the Rue Saint-Louis side it had only three stories, each fifteen to twenty feet in height. The ground-floor was not so lofty, and was pierced with windows protected by enormous iron bars and sunk dismally into the gloomy thickness of the walls, and with an arched

gateway almost as tall as it was broad, and bearing a cast-iron knocker on its doors, which were painted dark-green and studded with enormous nails that formed stars and lozenges on the two folds. This characteristic entrance was flanked on either side with spur-posts sloping backwards, and strapped with broad iron bands. One could see that formerly a gutter had run under the middle of the gateway, between the weatherings of the pebble-work of the porch; but M. Béraud had decided to stop up this gutter and have the entrance asphalted: this, however, was the only concession he could ever be persuaded to make to modern architecture. The windows of the upper floors were ornamented with thin hand-rails of wrought iron, through which could be seen their colossal casements of strong brown woodwork with little green panes. At the top the roof was interrupted by the dormers, and the gutter alone continued its course so as to discharge the rain-water into the down-pipes. And what still further increased the severe nakedness of the façade was the entire absence of awnings or shutters, for at no season of the year did the sun shine on those pale, melancholy stones. This façade with its venerable air, its burgher severity, slumbered solemnly amid the self-absorption of the district, in the silence of the street that no carriage ever disturbed.

In the interior of the mansion was a square court-yard, surrounded by a colonnade, a reduced copy of the Place Royale, paved with enormous flags, and completing the cloistral appearance of this lifeless house. Opposite the porch a fountain, a lion's head

half worn away, its gaping jaws alone distinguishable, discharged a heavy, monotonous stream of water through an iron tube into a basin green with moss, its edges polished by wear. This water was cold as ice. Weeds sprouted between the flagstones. In the summer a meagre ray of sunlight entered the court-yard, and this infrequent visit had whitened a corner of the south façade, while the three other walls, morose and black, were streaked with moisture. There, in the depth of that court-yard, cold and silent as a well, lighted with a white, wintry light, one would have thought one's self a thousand leagues away from that new Paris in which every passionate enjoyment flamed amid the racket of gold.

The rooms of the house had the sad calm, the cold solemnity of the court-yard. Approached by a broad iron-railed staircase, on which the footsteps and coughs of visitors resounded as in the aisle of a church, they stretched in long strings of wide, lofty rooms, in which the old-fashioned, heavy furniture of dark wood was lost; and the pale light was peopled only by the figures on the tapestries, whose great, pallid bodies could be vaguely discerned. There was all the luxury of the old-fashioned Parisian middle-class, a luxury that is Spartan and all-enduring. Chairs whose oak seats are barely covered with a little tow, beds with stiff sheets, linen-chests the roughness of whose boards would strangely endanger the frail existence of modern garments. M. Béraud du Châtel had selected his rooms in the darkest part of the mansion, between the street and the court-yard, on the first floor. He there found himself in a won-

derful surrounding of peacefulness, silence, and gloom. When he opened the doors, traversing the solemnity of the rooms with his slow, serious step, he might have been taken for one of those members of the old parliaments, whose portraits were hung on the walls, returning home wrapt in thought after discussing and refusing to sign an edict of the king.

Yet in this lifeless house, in this cloister, there was one warm nest full of life, a corner of sunshine and gaiety, a nook of adorable childhood, of fresh air, of bright light. One had to climb a host of little stairways, pass along ten or twelve corridors, go down and up again, make a positive journey, and then at last one reached a huge room, a sort of belvedere built on the roof, at the back of the house, over above the Quai de Béthune. It looked due South. The window opened so wide that the heavens, with all their sunbeams, all their ether, all their blue, seemed to enter there. It was perched aloft like a dove-cot, and contained long flower-boxes, an immense aviary, and not a single article of furniture. There was only just some matting spread over the floor. This was "the children's room." All over the house it was known and spoken of by that name. The house was so cold, the court-yard so damp, that Aunt Élisabeth had dreaded lest Christine and Renée should suffer harm from the chill breath that hung about the walls; many a time had she scolded the children for running about the arcades and amusing themselves by dipping their little arms into the icy water of the fountain. Thereupon she conceived the idea of making use of this forgotten attic for them,

the only corner into which the sun had, for nearly two centuries, entered and rejoiced, in the midst of the cobwebs. She gave them some matting, birds, and flowers. The bairns were wild with delight. Renée lived there during the holidays, bathing in the yellow rays of that good sun, who seemed pleased with the decorations lavished upon his retreat and with the two fair-haired heads sent to keep him company. The room became a paradise, ever resounding with the song of the birds and the children's babbling. It had been yielded to them for their exclusive use. They spoke of "our room;" it was their home; they went so far as to lock themselves in so as to put it beyond doubt that they were the sole mistresses of the room. What a happy nook! On the matting lay a massacre of playthings, expiring in the bright sunshine.

But the great delight of the children's room was the vastness of the horizon. From the other windows of the house there was nothing to look at but black walls, a few feet away. But from this window one could see all that part of the Seine, all that piece of Paris which extends from the Cité to the Pont de Bercy, boundlessly flat, resembling some quaint Dutch city. Down below, on the Quai de Béthune, were tumble-down wooden sheds, accumulations of beams and crumbling roofs, amid which the children often amused themselves by watching enormous rats run about, with a vague fear of seeing them clamber up the high walls. But beyond all this the real rapture began. The boom, with its tiers of timbers, its buttresses resembling those of a Gothic cathedral, and the

slender Pont de Constantine, hanging like a strip of lace beneath the wayfarers' footsteps: crossed each other at right angles, and seemed to dam up and keep within bounds the huge mass of the river. The trees of the Halle aux Vins opposite and the shrubberies of the Jardin des Plantes, further away, spread out their greenness to the distant horizon: while on the other bank of the river the Quai Henri IV and the Quai de la Rapée extended their low and irregular edifices, their row of houses which, from above, resembled the tiny wood and cardboard houses which the little girls kept in boxes. In the background on the right the slated roof of the Salpêtrière rose blue above the trees. Then, in the centre, sloping down to the Seine, the wide-paved banks formed two long gray tracks, streaked here and there by a row of casks, a cart and its team, an empty wood or coal-barge lying high and dry. But the soul of all this, the soul that filled the whole landscape, was the Seine, the living river; it came from afar, from the vaguely-shimmering edge of the horizon, it emerged from the distance, as from a dream, to flow straight down to the children with its tranquil majesty, its puissant swell, which spread and widened itself into a great sheet of water at their feet, at the extremity of the island. The two bridges that crossed it, the Pont de Bercy and the Pont d'Austerlitz, looked like necessary boundaries placed there to contain it, to prevent it from surging up to the room. The little ones loved this giant, they filled their eyes with its colossal flux, with that eternal murmuring flood which rolled towards them as though to reach them, and which branched out to left and

right, and disappeared into the unknown with the docility of a conquered Titan. On fine days, on mornings when the sky hung blue overhead, they would be enraptured with the pretty dresses of the Seine; it wore dresses of a changeable hue that altered from blue to green with a thousand tints of infinite tenderness; dresses of silk shot with white flames and trimmed with frills of satin; and the barges drawn up on either bank bordered it with a black velvet ribbon. In the distance especially, the material became beautiful and precious as the enchanted gauze of a fairy's robe; and, beyond the belt of dark-green satin with which the shadow of the bridges girdled the Seine, were breast-plates of gold and lappets of a plaited sun-coloured stuff. The immense sky formed a vault over the water, over the low rows of houses, over the green of the two parks.

Sometimes Renée, wearied of this unbounded horizon, a big girl already, and full of a fleshly curiosity brought back from her boarding-school, would throw a glance into the swimming school attached to Petit's floating baths, which were moored to the end of the island. She sought to catch a glimpse, through the flapping linen cloths hung up on lines to serve as a roof, of the men in bathing-drawers showing their naked bellies.

CHAPTER III

Maxime remained at school at Plassans until the holidays of 1854. He was a few months over thirteen, and had just passed the fifth class. It was then that his father decided to let him come to Paris. He reflected that a son of that age would give him a certain position, would fix him definitively in the part he played of a wealthy widower, twice married, and serious in his views. When he informed Renée, towards whom he prided himself upon his extreme gallantry, of his intention, she answered, negligently:

"That's right, have the boy up . . . . He will amuse us a little. One is bored to death in the mornings."

The boy arrived a week later. He was already a tall, spare stripling, with a girl's face, a delicate, forward look, and very light flaxen hair. But great God! how oddly he was got up! He was cropped to the ears, his hair was cut so short that the whiteness of his cranium was barely covered with a shadow of pale down, he wore trousers too short for him, hob-nailed shoes, a hideously threadbare tunic

that was much too wide and made him look almost hunchbacked. In this garb, surprised at the new things he saw, he looked about him, not at all timidly, but with the savage, cunning air of a precocious child, that is loth to come out of its shell at first sight.

A servant had just fetched him from the station, and he was waiting in the big drawing-room, charmed with the gilding on the ceiling and furniture, thoroughly delighted with this luxury in which he was about to spend his life, when Renée, returning from her tailor, swept in like a gust of wind. She threw off her hat and the white burnoose which she had placed over her shoulders to protect her from the cold, which was already keen. She appeared before Maxime, who was stupefied with admiration, in all the brilliancy of her marvellous attire.

The child thought she was dressed up. She wore a delicious skirt of blue faille, with deep flounces, and over that a sort of French-guard's coat in pale-gray silk. The flaps of the coat, lined with blue satin of a deeper shade than the faille of the skirt, were bravely caught up and secured with knots of ribbon; the cuffs of the flat sleeves, the broad lapels of the bodice stood out wide, trimmed with the same satin. And as a supreme effort of trimming, as a bold stroke of eccentricity, two rows of large buttons imitating sapphires and fastening into blue rosettes, adorned the front of the coat. It was ugly and entrancing.

When Renée perceived Maxime:

"It's the boy, is it not?" asked she of the servant, surprised to find him as tall as herself.

The child was devouring her with his eyes. This lady with a skin so white, whose bosom showed through a gap of her plaited shirt-front, this sudden and charming apparition, with her hair dressed high, her elegant, gloved hands, her little Wellington boots with pointed heels that dug into the carpet, delighted him, seemed to him to be the good fairy of this warm, gilded room. He began to smile, and he was just sufficiently awkward to retain his urchin gracefulness.

"Why, he is quite amusing!" cried Renée . . . . "But what a shame! how they have cut his hair! . . . Listen, my little friend, your father will probably not come in till dinner-time, and I shall have to make you at home . . . . I am your step-mother, monsieur. Will you give me a kiss?"

"Yes, if you like," answered Maxime, boldly.

And he kissed Renée on both cheeks, taking her by the shoulders, whereby the French-guard's coat was a little rumpled. She freed herself, laughing, saying:

"Oh dear, how amusing he is, the little shaveling! . . ."

She came back to him, more serious.

"We shall be friends, sha'n't we? . . . . I want to be a mother to you. I was thinking about it while I was waiting for my tailor, who was engaged, and I said to myself that I must be very kind and bring you up quite properly . . . . That will be nice!"

Maxime continued to stare at her with his blue forward girl's eyes, and suddenly:

"How old are you?" he asked.

"But you should never ask that!" she cried,

clasping her hands together . . . . "He knows nothing, poor little wretch! He will have to be taught everything . . . . Luckily I can still tell my age. I am twenty-one."

"I shall soon be fourteen . . . . You might be my sister."

He did not go on, but his look added that he had expected to find his father's second wife much older. He was standing quite close to her, and examining her neck so attentively that she almost ended by blushing. Her giddy head, moreover, was turning: it was never able to fix itself long on the same subject; and she began to walk about, to speak of her tailor, forgetting she was talking to a child.

"I wanted to be here to receive you. But think, Worms brought me this dress this morning . . . . I tried it on and I thought it rather successful. It is very smart, is it not?"

She had moved before a mirror. Maxime walked to and fro behind her so as to examine her on every side.

"Only," she continued, "when I put on the coat, I noticed there was a large fold, there, on the left shoulder, d'you see? . . . That fold is very ugly, it makes me look as if I had one shoulder higher than the other."

He came up to her and pressed his finger over the fold as though to smooth it down, and his vicious school-boy hand seemed to linger on that spot with a certain satisfaction.

"Well," she continued, "I couldn't wait. I had the horses put to, and I went to tell Worms what

I thought of his outrageous carelessness . . . . He promised me to put it right."

Thereupon she remained before the mirror, still looking at herself, lost in a sudden reverie. She ended by laying one finger on her lips, with an air of contemplative impatience. And quite low, as if talking to herself:

"It wants something . . . . Yes, really, it wants something . . . ."

Then, with a quick movement, she turned round, placed herself in front of Maxime, and asked him:

"Is it really right? . . . Don't you think it wants something, a trifle, a bow somewhere or other?"

The school-boy was reassured by Renée's familiarity, and resumed all the assurance of his forward nature. He drew back, came nearer, screwed up his eyes, and murmured:

"No, no, it wants nothing, it's very pretty, very pretty indeed . . . . If anything, I think there is something too much."

He blushed a little, despite his audacity, came nearer still, and with his finger-tip tracing an acute angle on Renée's breast:

"If I were you," he continued, "I would hollow out that lace so, and wear a necklace with a great big cross."

She clapped her hands, radiant with delight.

"That's it, that's it," she exclaimed . . . . "I had the great big cross on the tip of my tongue."

She folded back the chemisette, left the room for two minutes, and returned with the necklace and

cross. And resuming her place in front of the mirror she murmured triumphantly:

"Oh, perfect, quite perfect . . . . But he's no fool, that little shaveling! Used you to dress the girls in the country, then? You and I are sure to get on well together. But you will have to do as I tell you. In the first place, you must let your hair grow and never wear that horrid tunic again. Then you must faithfully follow my lessons in good manners. I want you to become a smart young man."

"But, of course," said the child naïvely; "since papa is rich now and you are his wife."

She smiled, and with her customary vivacity:

"Then let us begin by dropping the plural. I have been saying thou and you anyhow. It's too silly . . . . Will you love me very much?"

"I will love you with all my heart," he replied, with the effusiveness of a boy towards his sweetheart.

Such was the first interview between Maxime and Renée. The child did not go to school till a month later. During the first few days his step-mother played with him as with a doll; she brushed off his country manners, and it must be added that he seconded her with extreme willingness. When he appeared, newly arrayed from head to foot by his father's tailor, she uttered a cry of joyous surprise: he looked as pretty as a daisy, she said. Only his hair took an unconscionable time in growing. Renée used always to say that all one's face lay in one's hair. She tended her own devoutly. For a long time she had been maddened by the colour of it,

that peculiar pale yellow colour which reminded one of good butter. But when yellow hair came into fashion she was delighted, and to make believe that she did not follow the fashion because she could not help herself, she swore she dyed it every month.

Maxime was already terribly knowing for his thirteen years. His was one of those frail, precocious natures in which the senses assert themselves early. He had vices before he knew the meaning of desire. He had twice narrowly escaped being expelled from school. Had Renée's eyes been accustomed to provincial graces, she would have perceived that, strangely got-up though he was, the little shaveling, as she called him, had a way of smiling, of turning his neck, of putting out his arms prettily, with the feminine air of the love-boys at school. He took great pains over his hands, which were long and slender; and though his hair was cropped short by order of the head-master, an ex-colonel of engineers, he owned a little looking-glass which he drew from his pocket during school-time and placed between the leaves of his book, looking at himself in it for hours, examining his eyes, his gums, pulling pretty faces, studying the art of coquetry. His school-fellows hung round his blouse as round a petticoat, and he buckled his belt so tightly that he had the slim waist and undulating hips of a grown woman. True it was, he received as many kicks as kisses. And so the school at Plassans, a den of little miscreants like most provincial schools, was a hotbed of pollution in which were singularly developed that epicene temperament, that childhood fraught with evil from some mysterious

hereditary cause. Fortunately, age was about to improve him. But the sign of his boyish debauchery, this effemination of his whole being what time he had played the girl, was destined to remain in him, and to strike a lasting blow at his virility.

Renée called him "Mademoiselle," not knowing that six months earlier she would have hit the truth. He seemed to her very docile, very affectionate, and indeed his caresses often made her feel ill-at-ease. He had a way of kissing that heated the skin. But what delighted her was his roguishness; he was as entertaining as could be, and bold, already talking of women with a smile, holding his own against Renée's friends, against dear Adeline who had just married M. d'Espanet, and the fat Suzanne, wedded quite recently to Haffner, the big manufacturer. When he was fourteen he fell in love with the latter. He confided his passion to his step-mother, who was intensely amused.

"For myself I should have preferred Adeline," she said, "she is prettier."

"Perhaps so," replied the scapegrace, "but Suzanne is much stouter . . . . I like fine women . . . . If you were very good-natured, you would put in a word for me."

Renée laughed. Her doll, this tall lad with the girl's ways, seemed to her inimitable now that he had fallen in love. The time came when Mme. Haffner had seriously to defend herself. For the rest the ladies encouraged Maxime by their stifled laughter, their unfinished sentences, and the coquettish attitudes they assumed in presence of the precocious child.

Chapter III

"That fold is very ugly, it makes me look as if I had one shoulder higher than the other."

He came up to her and pressed his finger over the fold as though to smooth it down, and his vicious schoolboy hand seemed to linger on that spot with a certain satisfaction.

There was a touch of very aristocratic debauchery in this. All three, in the midst of their life of tumult, scorched by passion, lingered over the boy's delicious depravity as over a novel and harmless spice that stimulated their palates. They allowed him to touch their dresses, to pass his fingers over their shoulders when he followed them into the ante-room to help them on with their wraps; they passed him from hand to hand, laughing like madwomen when he kissed their wrists on the veined side, on the place where the skin is so soft; and then they became motherly, and learnedly instructed him in the art of being a smart man and pleasing the ladies. He was their plaything, a little toy man of ingenious workmanship, that kissed, and made love, and had the sweetest vices in the world, but remained a plaything, a little cardboard man that one need not be too much afraid of, only just sufficiently to feel a very pleasant thrill at the touch of his childish hand.

After the holidays Maxime went to the Lycée Bonaparte. It was the fashionable public school, the one that Saccard was bound to choose for his son. The child, soft and light-headed though he was, had by that time a very quick intelligence; but he applied himself to far other things than his classical studies. He was nevertheless a well-behaved pupil, who never descended to the Bohemian level of dunces, and who foregathered with the proper and well-dressed young gentlemen of whom nothing was ever said. All that remained to him of his boyhood was a veritable cult of dress. Paris opened his eyes, turned him into a smart young man, with tight-fitting clothes

of the latest fashion. He was the Brummel of his form. He appeared there as he would in a drawing-room, daintily booted, correctly gloved, with prodigious neckties and unutterable hats. There were about twenty like him in all, who formed a sort of aristocracy, offering one another, as they left the school, Havannah cigars out of gold-clasped cigar-cases, and having servants in livery to carry their parcels of books. Maxime had persuaded his father to buy him a tilbury and a little black horse, which were the admiration of his school-fellows. He drove himself, while a footman sat with folded arms on the back seat, holding on his knees the schoolboy's knapsack, a real ministerial portfolio in brown grained leather. And you should have seen how lightly, how cleverly, and with what excellent form Maxime drove in ten minutes from the Rue de Rivoli to the Rue du Havre, drew up his horse before the school-door, threw the reins to the footman, and said:

"Jacques, at half-past four, see?"

The neighbouring shopkeepers were delighted with the fine grace of this fair-haired spark whom they saw regularly twice a day arriving and leaving in his trap. On returning home he sometimes gave a lift to a friend, whom he set down at his door. The two children smoked, looked at the women, splashed the passers-by, as though they were returning from the races. An astonishing little world, a foolish, foppish brood which you can see any day in the Rue du Havre, smartly dressed in their dandy jackets, aping the ways of rich and worn-out men, while the Bohemian contingent of the school, the

real school-boys, come shouting and shoving, stamping on the pavement with their thick shoes, with their books hung over their backs by a strap.

Renée, who took herself seriously as a mother and as a governess, was delighted with her pupil. She left nothing undone, in fact, to complete his education. She was at that time passing through a period of mortification and tears; a lover had jilted her openly, before the eyes of all Paris, to attach himself to the Duchesse de Sternich. She dreamt of Maxime as her consolation, she made herself older, she racked her brains to appear maternal, and became the most eccentric mentor imaginable. Often would Maxime's tilbury be left at home, and Renée come to fetch the schoolboy in her big calash. They hid the brown portfolio under the seat and drove to the Bois, then in all the freshness of novelty. There she put him through a course of tip-top elegance. She pointed everyone out to him in the fat and happy Paris of the Empire, still under the ecstasy of that stroke of the wand which had changed yesterday's starvelings and swindlers into great lords and millionaires snorting and swooning under the weight of their cash-boxes. But the child questioned her above all about the women, and as she was very familiar with him, she gave him exact particulars: Madame du Guende was stupid but admirably made; the Comtesse Vanska, a very rich woman, had been a street-singer before marrying a Pole who beat her, so they said; as to the Marquise d'Espanet and Suzanne Haffner, they were inseparable, and though they were Renée's intimate friends, she added, compressing her lips as

if to prevent herself from saying more, that some very nasty stories were told about them; the beautiful Madame de Lauwerens also was a terribly compromising woman, but she had such fine eyes, and after all everybody knew that she herself was quite above reproach, although she was a little too much mixed up in the intrigues of the poor little women who frequented her, Madame Daste, Madame Teissière, and the Baronne de Meinhold. Maxime obtained the portraits of these ladies, and with them filled an album that lay on the table in the drawing-room. With that vicious artfulness which was the dominant note in his character, he tried to embarrass his step-mother by asking for particulars about the fast women, pretending to take them for ladies in society. Renée became serious and moral, and told him that they were horrid creatures and that he must be careful and keep away from them; and then forgetting herself, she spoke of them as of people whom she had known intimately. One of the youngster's great delights, again, was to get her on to the subject of the Duchesse de Sternich. Each time her carriage passed theirs in the Bois, he never failed to mention the duchesse's name, with wicked slyness and an under-glance that showed that he knew of Renée's last adventure. Whereupon in a harsh voice she tore her rival to pieces: how old she was growing! Poor woman! She made-up her face, she had lovers hidden in all her cupboards, she had sold herself to a chamberlain that she might procure admission to the imperial bed. And she ran on, while Maxime, to exasperate her, declared that he thought Madame de

Sternich delicious. Such lessons as these singularly developed the school-boy's intelligence, the more so as the young teacher repeated them wherever they went, in the Bois, at the theatre, at parties. The pupil became very proficient.

What Maxime loved was to live among women's skirts, in the midst of their finery, in their rice-powder. He always remained more or less of a girl, with his slim hands, his beardless face, his plump white neck. Renée consulted him seriously about her gowns. He knew the good makers of Paris, summed each of them up in a word, talked about the cunningness of such an one's bonnets and the logic of such another's dresses. At seventeen there was not a milliner whom he had not probed, not a bootmaker whom he had not studied through and through. This quaint abortion, who during his English lessons read the prospectuses which his perfumer sent him every Friday, could have delivered a brilliant lecture on the fashionable Paris world, customers and purveyors included, at an age when country urchins dare not look their housemaid in the face. Frequently, on his way home from school, he would bring back in his tilbury a bonnet, a box of soap, or a piece of jewellery which his step-mother had ordered the preceding day. He had always some strip of musk-scented lace hanging about in his pockets.

But his great treat was to go with Renée to the illustrious Worms, the tailor genius to whom the queens of the Second Empire bowed the knee. The great man's show-room was wide and square, and furnished with huge divans. Maxime entered it

with religious emotion. Dresses undoubtedly have a perfume of their own; silk, satin, velvet and lace had mingled their faint aromas with those of hair and of amber-scented shoulders; and the atmosphere of the room retained that sweet-smelling warmth, that fragrance of flesh and of luxury, which transformed the apartment into a chapel consecrated to some secret divinity. It was often necessary for Renée and Maxime to wait for hours; a series of anxious women sat there, waiting their turn, dipping biscuits into glasses of Madeira, helping themselves from the great table in the middle, which was covered with bottles and plates full of cakes. The ladies were at home, they talked without restraint, and when they ensconced themselves around the room, it was as though a flight of white Lesbian doves had alighted on the sofas of a Parisian drawing-room. Maxime, whom they endured and loved for his girlish air, was the only man admitted into the circle. He there tasted delights divine; he glided along the sofas like a supple adder; he was discovered under a skirt, behind a bodice, between two dresses, where he made himself quite small and kept very quiet, inhaling the warm fragrance of his neighbours with the demeanour of a choir-boy partaking of the sacrament.

"That child pokes his nose in everywhere," said the Baronne de Meinhold, tapping his cheeks.

He was so slightly built that the ladies did not think him more than fourteen. They amused themselves by making him tipsy with the illustrious Worms's Madeira. He made astounding speeches to

them, which made them laugh till they cried. However, it was the Marquise d'Espanet who found the right word to describe the position. One day when Maxime was discovered behind her back in a corner of the divan:

"That boy ought to have been born a girl," she murmured, on seeing him so pink, blushing, penetrated with the satisfaction he had enjoyed from her proximity.

Then, when the great Worms at last received Renée, Maxime followed her into the consultation room. He had ventured to speak on two or three occasions while the master remained absorbed in the contemplation of his client, as the high-priests of the Beautiful hold that Leonardo da Vinci did in the presence of la Gioconda. The master had deigned to smile upon the correctness of his observations. He made Renée stand up before a glass which rose from the floor to the ceiling, and pondered with knit brows, while Renée, seized with emotion, held her breath, so as not to stir. And after a few minutes the master, as though seized and moved by inspiration, sketched in broad, jerky strokes the work of art which he had just conceived, ejaculating in short phrases:

"A Montespan dress in pale-gray faille . . . . the skirt describing a rounded basque in front . . . . large gray satin bows to catch it up on the hips . . . . and a puffed apron of pearl-gray tulle, the puffs separated by strips of gray satin."

He pondered once again, seemed to descend to the very depths of his genius, and, with the triumphant

facial contortion of a pythoness on her tripod, concluded:

"We will have in the hair, on the top of this bonny head, Psyche's dreamy butterfly, with wings of changeful blue."

But at other times inspiration was stubborn. The illustrious Worms summoned it in vain, and concentrated his faculties to no purpose. He distorted his eyebrows, turned livid, took his poor head between his hands and shook it in his despair, and beaten, throwing himself into an arm-chair:

"No," he would mutter, in a pitiful voice, "no, not to-day . . . . It is not possible . . . . You ladies expect too much. The source is exhausted."

And he showed Renée out, repeating:

"Impossible, impossible, dear lady, you must come back another day . . . . I don't grasp you this morning."

The fine education that Maxime received had a first result. At seventeen the young scapegrace seduced his step-mother's maid. The worst of the affair was that the lady's-maid got a baby. They had to send her into the country with the brat, and to buy her a little annuity. Renée was horribly annoyed at this incident. Saccard did not interfere except to arrange the financial part of the question; but his young wife scolded her pupil roundly. That he, of whom she wanted to make a distinguished man, should compromise himself with a girl like that! What a ridiculous, disgraceful beginning, what a discreditable exploit! He might at least have led off with a lady!

"Quite true!" he replied quietly, "if your dear friend Suzanne had been willing, it was she who might have been sent to the country."

"Oh! the scamp!" she murmured, disarmed, enlivened with the idea of seeing Suzanne retiring to the country with an annuity of twelve hundred francs.

Then a funnier thought occurred to her, and forgetting that she was playing the indignant mother, bursting into pearly laughter which she restrained with her fingers, she stammered, giving him a side-long glance:

"I say, how you would have caught it from Adeline, and what a scene she would have made her . . . ."

She did not finish. Maxime and she were screaming. Such was the fine catastrophe of Renée's lecture on this incident.

Meanwhile Saccard troubled himself not at all about the two children, as he called his son and his second wife. He left them absolute liberty, glad to see them such good friends, whereby the flat was filled with noisy merriment. A singular apartment, this first floor in the Rue de Rivoli. The doors were slamming to and fro all day long. The servants talked loud; its new and dazzling luxury was continually traversed by a flood of vast, floating skirts, by processions of tradespeople, by the uproar of Renée's friends, Maxime's chums and Saccard's callers. From nine to eleven the last received the strangest set imaginable: senators and bailiffs' clerks, duchesses and old-clothes-women, all the scum that the tempests

of Paris hurled at his door every morning, silk gowns, dirty skirts, blouses, dress-coats, all of whom he received with the same hurried manner, the same impatient, nervous gestures; he clinched bits of business with two words, got rid of twenty difficulties at a time, and gave solutions at a run. One would have thought that this restless little man with the very loud voice was fighting with people in his study, and with the furniture, tumbling head over heels, knocking his head against the ceiling to make his ideas flash out, and always falling triumphantly on his feet. Then at eleven o'clock he went out; he was not seen again during the day; he breakfasted out, he often even dined out. From that time the house belonged to Renée and Maxime; they took possession of the father's study; they unpacked the tradesmen's parcels there, and articles of finery lay about among the business-papers. Sometimes serious people had to wait for an hour at the study-door while the school-boy and the young married woman discussed a bow of ribbon, seated at either end of Saccard's writing-table. Renée had the horses put to ten times a day. They rarely had a meal together; two of the three would be rushing about, forgetting themselves, staying out till midnight. An apartment of racket, of business, and of pleasure, through which modern life, with its noise of jingling gold, of rustling skirts, swept like a whirlwind.

Aristide Saccard was in his element at last. He had revealed himself a great speculator, a brewer of millions. After the master-stroke in the Rue de la Pépinière, he threw himself boldly into the struggle

which was beginning to fill Paris with shameful wreckages and lightning triumphs. He began by gambling on certainties, repeating his first successful stroke, buying up houses which he knew to be threatened with the pickaxe, and utilizing his friends in order to obtain fat compensation. The moment came when he had five or six houses, those houses that he had looked at so curiously, as though they were acquaintances of his, in the days when he was only a poor surveyor of roads. But these were the mere first steps of art. There was no great cleverness wanted to run out leases, conspire with the tenants, and rob the State and individuals; nor did he think the game worth the candle. For which reason he soon made use of his genius for transactions of a more complicated character.

Saccard first invented the trick of making secret purchases of house-property on the city's account. A decision of the Council of State had placed the Municipality in a difficult position. It had acquired by private contract a large number of houses, in the hope of running out the leases and turning the tenants out without compensation. But these purchases were pronounced to be genuine acts of expropriation, and the city had to pay. It was then that Saccard offered to lend his name to the city: he bought houses, ran out the leases, and for a consideration handed over the property at a fixed date. And he even ended by playing a double game: he acted as buyer both for the Municipality and for the préfet. Whenever the thing was irresistibly tempting, he stuck to the house himself. The State paid. In

reward for his assistance he received building concessions for bits of streets, for open spaces, which he disposed of in his turn even before the new thoroughfare was commenced. It was a fierce gamble: the new streets were speculated in as one speculates in stocks and shares. Certain ladies were in the swim, handsome girls, intimately connected with some of the higher functionaries; one of them, whose white teeth are world-renowned, has nibbled up whole streets on more than one occasion. Saccard was insatiable, he felt his greed grow at the sight of the flood of gold that glided through his fingers. It seemed to him as though a sea of twenty-franc pieces extended about him, swelling from a lake to an ocean, filling the vast horizon with a sound of strange waves, a metallic music that tickled his heart; and he grew adventurous, plunging more boldly every day, diving and coming up again, now on his back, then on his belly, swimming through this immensity in fair weather and foul, and relying on his strength and skill to prevent him from ever sinking to the bottom.

Paris was at that time disappearing in a cloud of plaster. The days predicted by Saccard on the Buttes Montmartre had come. The city was being slashed with sabre-cuts, and he had a finger in every gash, in every wound. He had belonging to him demolished houses in every quarter of the city. In the Rue de Rome he was mixed up in that astounding story of the pit which was dug by a company in order to carry away five or six thousand cubic mètres of soil and create a belief in gigantic works, and which had afterwards to be filled up, on the failure of the company,

by bringing the soil back from Saint-Ouen. Saccard came out of this with an easy conscience and full pockets, thanks to the friendly intervention of his brother Eugène. At Chaillot he assisted in cutting through the heights and throwing them into a hollow in order to make way for the boulevard that runs from the Arc de Triomphe to the Pont d'Alma. In the direction of Passy it was he who conceived the idea of scattering the refuse of the Trocadéro over the high level, so that to this day the good soil is buried two mètres below the surface, and the very weeds refuse to grow through the rubbish. He was to be found in twenty places at once, at every spot where there was some insurmountable obstacle, a heap of rubbish that no one knew what to do with, a hollow that could not be filled up, a great mass of soil and plaster over which the engineers in their feverish haste grew impatient, but in which he rummaged with his nails, and invariably ended by finding some bonus or some speculation to his taste. On the same day he ran from the works at the Arc de Triomphe to those at the Boulevard Saint-Michel, from the clearings in the Boulevard Malesherbes to the embankments at Chaillot, dragging after him an army of workmen, lawyers, shareholders, dupes, and swindlers.

But his purest glory was the Crédit Viticole, which he had founded with Toutin-Laroche. The latter was the official director; he himself only figured as a member of the board. In this connection Eugène had done his brother another good turn. Thanks to him the Government authorized the com-

pany and watched over its career with great good nature. On one delicate occasion, when a malignant journal ventured to criticise one of the company's operations, the *Moniteur* went so far as to publish a note forbidding any discussion of so honourable an undertaking, one which the State deigned to protect. The Crédit Viticole was based upon an excellent financial system: it lent the wine-growers half of the estimated value of their property, ensured the repayment of the loan by a mortgage, and received interest from the borrowers in addition to instalments of the principal. Never was there mechanism more prudent or more worthy. Eugène had declared to his brother, with a knowing smile, that the Tuileries expected people to be honest. M. Toutin-Laroche interpreted this wish by allowing the wine-growers' loan-office to work quietly, and founding by its side a banking-house which attracted capital and gambled feverishly, launching out into every sort of adventure. Thanks to the formidable impulse it received from its director, the Crédit Viticole soon achieved a well-established reputation for solidity and prosperity. At the outset, in order to offer at the Bourse in one job a mass of shares on which no dividend had yet been paid, and to give them the appearance of having been long in circulation, Saccard had the ingenuity to have them trodden on and beaten, a whole night long, by the bank-messengers, armed with birch-brooms. The place resembled a branch of the Bank of France. The house occupied by the offices, with its court-yard full of private carriages, its austere iron railings, its broad flight of steps and its monumental staircase

its suites of luxurious reception-rooms, its world of clerks and of liveried lackeys, seemed to be the grave, dignified temple of Mammon; and nothing filled the public with a more religious emotion than the sanctuary, the cashier's office, which was approached by a corridor of hallowed bareness and contained the safe, the god, crouching, embedded in the wall, squat and somnolent, with its triple lock, its massive flanks, its air of a brute divinity.

Saccard carried through a big job with the Municipality. The latter was greatly in debt, was crushed by its debts, dragged into this dance of gold which it had led off to please the Emperor and to fill certain people's pockets, and was now reduced to borrowing covertly, not caring to confess its violent fever, its stone-and-pickaxe madness. It had begun to issue what were called delegation bonds, really bills of exchange payable at a distant date, so that the contractors might be paid on the day the agreements were signed, and thus enabled to obtain money by discounting the bonds. The Crédit Viticole had graciously accepted this paper at the contractors' hands. One day when the Municipality was in want of money, Saccard went and tempted it. It received a considerable advance on an issue of delegation bonds, which M. Toutin-Laroche swore he held from contracting companies, and which he dragged through every gutter of speculation. From thenceforward the Crédit Viticole was safe from attack; it held Paris by the throat. The director now talked only with a smile of the famous Société Générale of the Ports of Morocco; and yet it still

continued to exist, and the newspapers continued regularly to extol its great commercial stations. One day when M. Toutin-Laroche endeavoured to induce Saccard to take shares in this society, the latter laughed in his face, and asked him if he thought he was such a fool as to invest his money in the Société Générale of the Arabian Nights.

Up to that time Saccard had speculated successfully, with safe profits, cheating, selling himself, making money on deals, deriving some sort of gain from each of his operations. Soon, however, this gambling in differences ceased to suffice him; he disdained to glean and pick up the gold which men like Toutin-Laroche and the Baron Gouraud let drop behind them. He plunged his arms into the sack to the elbows. He went into partnership with Mignon, Charrier and Co., those famous contractors, who were then just starting and who were destined to make colossal fortunes. The Municipality had already decided no longer to carry out the works itself, but to have the boulevards laid out by contract. The tendering companies agreed to deliver a complete thoroughfare, with its trees planted, its benches and lamp-posts fixed, in return for a specified indemnity; sometimes even they delivered the thoroughfare for nothing, finding themselves amply remunerated by retaining the bordering building-ground, for which they asked a considerably enhanced price. Saccard through his connections obtained a concession to lay out three lots of boulevards. He was the ardent and somewhat blundering soul of the partnership. The Sieurs Mignon and Charrier, his creatures at

the outset, were a pair of fat, cunning cronies, master-masons who knew the value of money. They laughed in their sleeves at Saccard's horses and carriages; oftenest they kept on their blouses, always ready to shake hands with their workmen, and returning home covered with plaster. They came from Langres both of them. They brought into this burning and insatiable Paris their Champenois caution, their calm brains, not very open to impressions, not very intelligent, but exceedingly quick at profiting by opportunities for filling their pockets, contented to enjoy themselves later on. If Saccard pushed the business, infused his vigour into it, and his rage for greed, the Sieurs Mignon and Charrier, by their matter-of-fact ways, their methodical, narrow management, saved it a score of times from being capsized by the extraordinary imagination of their partner. They would never agree to having superb offices in a house which he wanted to build to astonish Paris. They refused moreover to entertain the subordinate speculations that sprouted each morning in his head: the erection of concert-halls and immense baths on the building-ground bordering their thoroughfares; of railways along the line of the new boulevards; of glass-roofed galleries which would increase the rent of the shops ten-fold, and allow Paris to walk about without getting wet. The contractors, in order to put a stop to these alarming projects, decided that these pieces of ground should be apportioned among the three partners, and that each of them should do as he please with his share. They wisely continued to sell theirs. Saccard built upon his. His brain seethed.

He would have proposed in all seriousness to place Paris under an immense bell-glass, so as to transform it into a hot-house for forcing pine-apples and sugar-canes.

Before long, turning over money by the shovelful, he had eight houses on the new boulevards. He had four that were completely finished, two in the Rue de Marignan and two on the Boulevard Haussmann; the four others, situated on the Boulevard Malesherbes, remained in progress, and one of them, in fact, a vast enclosure of planks from which a magnificent house was to arise, had not got further than the flooring of the first story. At this period his affairs became so complicated, he had so many strings attached to his fingers' ends, so many interests to watch over and puppets to work, that he slept barely three hours a night, and read his correspondence in his carriage. The marvellous part was that his coffers seemed inexhaustible. He held shares in every company, built houses with a sort of mania, turned to every trade and threatened to inundate Paris like a rising tide, and yet he was never seen to realize a genuine clear profit, to pocket a big sum of gold shining in the sun. This flood of gold with no known source, which seemed to flow from his office in rapidly-recurring waves, astonished the cockneys and made of him, at one moment, the prominent figure to whom the newspapers ascribed all the witticisms that came from the Bourse.

With such a husband Renée was as little married as she could be. She remained entire weeks almost without seeing him. For the rest he was perfect: he

opened his cash-box quite wide for her. At bottom she liked him as she would have liked an obliging banker. When she visited the Hôtel Béraud, she praised him highly before her father, whose cold austerity was in no way changed by his son-in-law's good fortune. Her contempt had disappeared; this man seemed so convinced that life is a mere business, he was so obviously born to coin money with whatever fell into his hands: women, children, paving-stones, sacks of plaster, consciences, that she was no longer able to reproach him for their marriage-bargain. Since that bargain he looked upon her in a measure as upon one of those fine houses which did him credit and which would, he hoped, yield him a large profit. He liked to see her well-dressed, noisy, attracting the attention of all Paris. That consolidated his position, doubled the probable figure of his fortune. He seemed handsome, young, amorous and giddy because of his wife. She was his partner, his unconscious accomplice. A new pair of horses, a two-thousand-crown dress, a surrender to some lover facilitated and often ensured the success of his most remunerative transactions. Also he often pretended to be tired out and sent her to a minister, to some functionary or other, to solicit an authorization or receive a reply. He said to her: "And be good!" in a tone all his own, bantering and coaxing in one. And when she returned, successful, he rubbed his hands, repeating his famous, "I hope you were good!" Renée laughed. He was too active to desire a Madame Michelin. Only he loved coarse pleasantries and improper hypotheses. For the rest, had Renée not "been

good," he would have experienced only the mortification of having really paid for the minister's or functionary's complaisance. To dupe people, to give them less than their money's worth, was his delight. He often said: "If I were a woman, I might sell myself, but I would never deliver the goods: that is too foolish."

This madcap of a Renée, who had shot one night into the Parisian firmament as the eccentric fairy of fashionable voluptuousness, was the most complex of women. Had she been brought up at home, she would doubtless by the aid of religion or some other nervous satisfaction have blunted the edge of the desire whose pricks at times maddened her. Her mind was of the middle-class: she was absolutely straightforward, loved logical views, feared Heaven and Hell, and was crammed with prejudice; she was the daughter of her father, of that placid, prudent race among which flourish the virtues of the fireside. And in this nature there sprouted and grew her prodigious fantasies, her ever reviving curiosity, her unspeakable longings. Among the ladies of theVisitation, free, her mind roaming amid the mystic voluptuousness of the chapel and the carnal attachments of her little friends, she had framed for herself a fantastic education, learning vice, throwing the frankness of her nature into it, and disordering her brain to the extent of singularly embarrassing her confessor by telling him that one day at mass she had experienced an irrational desire to get up and kiss him. Then she struck her breast, and turned pale at the thought of the Devil and his caldrons. The fault which later brought on her

marriage with Saccard, the brutal rape which she underwent with a sort of frightened expectation, made her despise herself, and accounted in a great measure for the subsequent abandonment of her whole life. She thought that she need no longer struggle against evil, that it was in her, that logic authorized her to pursue the study of wickedness to the end. She had still more curiosity than appetite. Thrown into the world of the Second Empire, abandoned to her imagination, kept in money, encouraged in her loudest eccentricities, she gave herself, then regretted it, and finally succeeded in killing her expiring good principles, for ever lashed, for ever pushed onwards by her insatiable desire for knowledge and sensation.

For the rest she had as yet turned only the first page of the book of vice. She was fond of talking in a low tone, and laughing, about the extraordinary cases of the tender friendship of Suzanne Haffner and Adeline d'Espanet, of the ticklish trade of Madame de Lauwereins, and of the Comtesse Vanska's tariffed kisses; but she still looked upon these things from afar, with the vague idea of tasting them, perhaps; and this indefinite longing that arose within her at evil hours still further increased her turbulent anxiety, her mad search after an unique, exquisite enjoyment of which she alone should partake. Her first lovers had not spoilt her; three times she had thought herself seized with a grand passion; love burst in her head like a cracker whose sparks failed to reach the heart. She went mad for a month, exhibiting herself with her heart's

lord all over Paris; and then one morning, amid all the racket of her amorousness, she became conscious of a crushing silence, an immense void. The first, the young Duc de Rozan, was a feast of sunshine that led to nothing; Renée, who had noticed him for his gentleness and his excellent manner, found him absolutely shallow, colourless and tedious when they were alone together. Mr. Simpson, an attaché at the American Legation, who came next, all but beat her, and thanks to this remained with her for more than a year. Then she took up the Comte de Chibray, one of the Emperor's aides-de-camp, an absurdly vain, good-looking man who was beginning to hang terribly on her hands when the Duchesse de Sternich took it into her head to become enamoured of him and to take him away from her; whereupon she wept for him and gave her friends to understand that her heart was bruised, and that she should never be in love again. And thus she drifted towards M. de Mussy, the most insignificant creature in the world, a young man who was making his way in diplomacy by leading cotillons with especial grace; she never knew exactly how she had come to give herself to him, and she kept him a long time, a prey to idleness, disgusted with the unknown that is explored in an hour, and deferring the trouble of a change until she met with some extraordinary adventure. At twenty-eight she was already horribly weary. Her boredom appeared to her all the more insupportable as her homely virtues took advantage of the hours when she was bored to complain and to disquiet her. She bolted her door, she had horrible headaches. And

then, when she opened the door again, it was a flood of silk and lace that surged through it with a great noise, a luxurious, joyous being with no care nor blush upon her brow.

Yet she had had a romance amid the fashionable commonplace of her life. One day, when she had gone out on foot to see her father, who disliked the noise of carriages at his door, she perceived, as she was walking back in the twilight along the Quai Saint-Paul, that she was being followed by a young man. It was warm; and the daylight was waning with amorous gentleness. She, who was never followed except on horseback in the lanes of the Bois, thought the adventure piquant, she felt flattered by it as by a new and somewhat brutal form of homage, whose very coarseness appealed to her. Instead of returning home, she turned down the Rue du Temple, and walked her admirer along the boulevards. The man, however, grew bolder and became so persistent that Renée, a little dismayed, lost her head, followed the Rue du Faubourg-Poissonnière, and took refuge in the shop of her husband's sister. The man came in after her. Mme. Sidonie smiled, seemed to understand, and left them alone. And when Renée made as if to follow her, the stranger held her back, addressed her with respectful fervour, and won her forgiveness. He was a clerk, he was called Georges, and she never asked him his surname. She came twice to see him; she came in through the shop, and he by the Rue Papillon. This chance love affair, picked up and accepted in the street, was one of her keenest

pleasures. She always thought of it with a certain shame, but with a singular smile of regret. Mme. Sidonie profited by the adventure in that she at last became the accomplice of her brother's second wife, a part to which she had been aspiring since the day of the wedding.

That poor Madame Sidonie had experienced a disappointment. While intriguing for the match she had expected to marry Renée a little herself, to make her one of her customers and derive a heap of profits from her. She judged women at a glance, as connoisseurs judge horseflesh. And so her consternation was great when, after allowing the couple a month to settle down, she perceived Mme. de Lauwerens enthroned in the centre of the drawing-room, and realized that she was already too late. Mme. de Lauwerens, a fine woman of six-and-twenty, made a business of launching new arrivals. She came of a very old family, and was married to a man in the higher financial world, who had the bad taste to refuse to pay her tailor's and milliner's bills. The lady, a very intelligent person, made money and kept herself. She loathed men, she said, but she supplied all her friends with them; there was always a full array of customers in the apartment which she occupied in the Rue de Provence over her husband's offices. You always found a snack there. You met your friends there in an unpremeditated and charming fashion. There was no harm in a young girl's going to see her dear Mme. de Lauwerens, and if chance brought men there who were, at all events, respectful, and moved in the best set—so much the worse. The

hostess was adorable in her long lace tea-gowns. Many a visitor would have chosen her in preference to her collection of blondes and brunettes. But rumour asserted that she was absolutely good. The whole secret of the affair lay there. She kept up her high position in society, had all the men for her friends, retained her pride as a virtuous woman, and derived a secret enjoyment from bringing others down and profiting by their fall. When Mme. Sidonie had enlightened herself as to the mechanism of the new invention, she was thunderstruck. It was the classical school, the woman in the old black dress carrying love-letters at the bottom of her basket, brought face to face with the modern, the lady of quality, who sells her friends in her boudoir while sipping a cup of tea. The modern school triumphed. Mme. Lauwerens looked coldly upon the shabby attire of Mme. Sidonie, in whom she scented a rival. And it was she who provided Renée with her first bore, the young Duc de Rozan, whom the fair financier had found much difficulty in disposing of. The classical school did not win the day till later on, when Mme. Sidonie lent her entresol to her sister-in-law so that she might gratify her caprice for the stranger of the Quai Saint-Paul. She remained her confidante.

But one ot Mme. Sidonie's faithful friends was Maxime. From his fifteenth year, he had been in the habit of prowling around at his aunt's, sniffing at the gloves that he found lying forgotten on the furniture. She who hated clear situations and never owned up to her little complacencies, ended by lending him the keys of her apartments on certain days, saying

that she was going to stay in the country till the next day. Maxime talked of some friends whom he wanted to entertain, and whom he dared not ask to his father's house. It was in the entresol in the Rue du Faubourg-Poissonnière that he spent several nights with the poor girl who had to be sent to the country. Mme. Sidonie borrowed her nephew's money, and went into ecstasies before him, murmuring in her soft voice that he was "smooth and pink as a cherub."

Maxime meantime had grown. He was now a nice-looking, slender young man, who had retained the rosy cheeks and blue eyes of childhood. His curly hair completed that "girl look" that so enchanted the ladies. He resembled poor Angèle with her soft expression and blonde paleness. But he was not even the equal of that indolent, shallow woman. The race of the Rougons became refined in him, grew delicate and vicious. Born of too young a mother, constituting a strange, jumbled, and, so to say, scattered mixture of his father's furious appetites and his mother's self-abandonment and weakness, he was a defective offspring in whom the parental shortcomings were fulfilled and aggravated. This family lived too fast; it was dying out already in the person of this frail creature, whose sex must have remained in suspense; he represented, not a greedy eagerness for gain and enjoyment like Saccard, but a mean nature devouring ready-made fortunes, a strange hermaphrodite making its entrance at the right moment in a society that was growing rotten. When Maxime rode in the Bois, pinched in at the waist like a woman, lightly dancing in the saddle, in

which he was swayed by the canter of his horse, he was the god of that age, with his swelling haunches, his long, slender hands, his sickly, lascivious air, his correct elegance, and his comic-opera slang. He was twenty years old, and already there was nothing left to surprise or disgust him. He had certainly dreamt of the most unheard-of filth. Vice with him was not an abyss, as with certain old men, but a natural, external growth. It waved over his fair hair, smiled upon his lips, dressed him in his clothes. But his special characteristic was his eyes, two clear and smiling blue apertures, coquette's mirrors, behind which one perceived all the emptiness of the brain. Those harlot's eyes were never lowered: they roamed in quest of pleasure, a pleasure without fatigue, which one summons and receives.

The everlasting whirlwind that swept through the apartment in the Rue de Rivoli and made its doors slam to and fro blew stronger in the measure that Maxime grew up, that Saccard enlarged the sphere of his operations, and that Renée threw more fever into her search for an unknown joy. These three beings ended by leading an astonishing existence of liberty and folly. It was the ripe and prodigious fruit of an epoch. The street invaded the apartment with its rumbling of carriages, its jostling of strangers, its license of language. The father, the step-mother and the step-son acted, talked and made themselves at home as though each of them had found himself leading a bachelor life alone. Three boon companions, three students sharing the same furnished room, could not have made use of that room with less

reserve for the installation of their vices, their loves, their noisy, adolescent gaiety. They accepted one another with a hand-shake, never seeming to suspect the reasons that united them under one roof, treating each other cavalierly, joyously, and thus assuming each the most entire independence. The family idea was replaced with them by a sort of partnership whose profits are divided in equal shares; each one drew his part of the pleasure to himself, and it was tacitly agreed that each should dispose of that part as best seemed to him. They went so far as to take their enjoyment in each other's presence, displaying it, describing it, without awakening any feeling but a little envy and curiosity.

Maxime now instructed Renée. When he went to the Bois with her, he told her stories about the fast women which entertained her vastly. A new woman could not appear by the lake, but he would lay himself out to ascertain the name of her lover, the allowance he made her, the style in which she lived. He knew these ladies' homes, and was acquainted with intimate details; he was a real living catalogue in which all the prostitutes in Paris were numbered, with a very complete description of each of them. This gazette of scandal was Renée's delight. On race-days, at Longchamps, when she drove by in her calash, she listened eagerly, albeit retaining the haughtiness of a woman of the real world, to how Blanche Muller deceived her attaché with a hair-dresser; or how the little baron had found the count in his drawers in the alcove of a skinny red-haired celebrity who was nicknamed the Crayfish.

Each day brought its tittle-tattle. When the story was rather too warm, Maxime lowered his voice, but told it to the end. Renée opened wide her eyes, like a child to whom a funny trick is being told, restrained her laughter, and then stifled it in her embroidered handkerchief, which she pressed daintily upon her lips.

Maxime also brought these ladies' photographs. He had actresses' photographs in all his pockets, and even in his cigar-case. From time to time he cleared them out and placed these ladies in the album that lay about on the furniture in the drawing-room, and that already contained the photographs of Renée's friends. There were men's photographs there too, MM. de Rozan, Simpson, de Chibray, de Mussy, as well as actors, writers, deputies, who had come to swell the collection nobody knew how. A strangely mixed society, a symbol of the jumble of persons and ideas that crossed Renée's and Maxime's lives. Whenever it rained or they felt bored, this album was the great subject of conversation. It always ended by falling under one's hand. Renée opened it with a yawn, for the hundredth time perhaps. Then her curiosity would reawaken, and the young man came and leant behind her. And then followed long discussions about the Crayfish's hair, Madame de Meinhold's double chin, Madame de Lauwerens' eyes, and Blanche Muller's bust; about the marquise's nose, which was a little on one side, and little Sylvia's mouth, which was renowned for the thickness of its lips. They compared the women with one another.

"If I were a man," said Renée, "I would choose Adeline."

"That's because you don't know Sylvia," replied Maxime. "She is so quaint! . . . I must say I prefer Sylvia."

The pages were turned over; sometimes the Duc de Rozan appeared, or Mr. Simpson, or the Comte de Chibray, and he added, jeering at her:

"Besides, your taste is perverted, everybody knows that . . . . Can anything more stupid be imagined than the faces of those men! Rozan and Chibray are both like Gustave, my hair-dresser."

Renée shrugged her shoulders, as if to say that she was beyond the reach of sarcasm. She again forgot herself in the contemplation of the pallid, smiling, or cross-grained faces contained in the album; she lingered longest over the portraits of the fast women, studying with curiosity the exact microscopic details of the photographs, the minute wrinkles, the tiny hairs. One day even she sent for a strong magnifying-glass, fancying she had perceived a hair on the Crayfish's nose. And in fact the glass did reveal a thin golden thread which had strayed from the eyebrows down to the middle of the nose. This hair diverted them, for a long time. For a week long the ladies who called were made to assure themselves in person of the presence of this hair. Thenceforward the magnifying-glass served to pick the women's faces to pieces. Renée made astonishing discoveries: she found unknown wrinkles, coarse skins, cavities imperfectly filled up with rice powder, until Maxime finally hid the

glass, declaring that it was not right to disgust one's self like that with the human countenance. The truth was that she scrutinized too rigorously the thick lips of Sylvia, for whom he cherished a particular fondness. They invented a new game. They asked this question: "With whom would I like to spend a night?" and they opened the album which was to supply for the answer. This brought about some very joyous couplings. The friends played this game for several evenings. Renée was in this way married successively to the Archbishop of Paris, to the Baron Gouraud, to M. de Chibray, which caused much laughter, and to her husband himself, which distressed her mightily. As to Maxime, either by chance, or through the mischievousness of Renée, who opened the album, he always fell to the marquise. But they never laughed so much as when fate coupled two men or two women together.

The familiarity between Renée and Maxime went so far that she told him the sorrows of her heart. He consoled and advised her. His father did not seem to exist. Then they came to confide in one another about their childhood. It was especially during their drives in the Bois that they felt a vague languor, a longing to tell one another things that are difficult to say, that are never told. The delight that children take in whispering about forbidden things, the fascination that exists for a young man and a young woman in lowering themselves to sin, if only in words, brought them back unceasingly to suggestive topics. They there partook deeply of a voluptuousness in which

they felt no self-reproaching, and in which they revelled, lazily reclining in the two corners of the carriage like two old school-fellows recalling their first escapades. They ended by becoming braggarts of immorality. Renée confessed that the little girls at the boarding-school were very smutty. Maxime went further and had the courage to relate some of the infamy of the college at Plassans.

"Ah! I can't tell you," murmured Renée.

Then she bent towards his ear as if the sound of her voice alone would have made her blush, and she confided to him one of those convent stories that are spun out in lewd songs. He had too rich a collection of similar anecdotes to be left behindhand. He hummed some very bawdy couplets in her ear. And little by little they entered upon a peculiar state of beatitude, rocked by all the carnal ideas they stirred up, tickled by little undefined desires. The carriage rolled gently on, and they returned home deliciously fatigued, more exhausted than on the morning after a night of love. They had sinned like two young men who, wandering down country lanes without mistresses, content themselves with an interchange of reminiscences.

A still greater familiarity and license existed between father and son. Saccard had realized that a great financier must love women and commit extravagances for them. He was a rough lover, and preferred money; but it formed part of his programme to frequent alcoves, to scatter bank-notes on certain mantelpieces, and from time to time to affix some noted strumpet as a sign-board to his speculations.

When Maxime had left school they used to meet in the same women's rooms and laugh over it. They were even rivals in a measure. Occasionally when the young man was dining at the "Maison d'Or" with some boisterous crew he heard Saccard's voice in an adjacent private room.

"I say! papa's next door!" he cried, with the grimace which he borrowed from the popular actors.

He went and knocked at the door of the private room, curious to see his father's conquest.

"Ah! it's you," said the latter, jovially. "Come in. You make so much noise that a man can't hear himself eat. Who are you with?"

"Why, there's Laure d'Aurigny, and Sylvia, and the Crayfish, and two more besides, I believe. They are wonderful: they dig their fingers into the dishes, and chuck handfuls of salad at our heads. My coat is covered with oil."

The father laughed, thinking this very amusing.

"Ah! young folk, young folk," he murmured. "That's not like us, is it, pet? We've had a nice quiet dinner, and now we're going to by-by."

And he took the woman by his side by the chin, and cooed with his Provençal snuffle, producing a queer sort of love music.

"Oh! the old cully!" . . . cried the woman. "How are you, Maxime? Mustn't I be fond of you, eh! to consent to sup with your scapegrace of a father. . . . I never see you now. Come the day after to-morrow, in the morning, early. . . . No, really, I have something to tell you."

Saccard finished an ice or a fruit, taking small

mouthfuls, blissfully. He kissed the woman on the shoulder, saying jestingly:

"You know, my loves, if I'm in the way I'll go out. . . . You can ring when I may come in again."

Then he carried the lady off, or sometimes went with her and joined in the noise of the next room. Maxime and he shared the same shoulders; their hands met around the same waists. They called to one another on the sofas, and repeated to one another aloud the confidences the women had whispered in their ears. And they carried their intimacy to the pitch of plotting together to carry off from the company the blonde or the brunette whom one of them had selected.

They were well known at Mabille. They went there arm in arm, after a good dinner, strolling round the garden, nodding to the women, tossing them a remark as they went by. They laughed out loud, without unlocking their arms, and came to one another's aid if necessary whenever the conversation became too lively. The father, who was very strong on this point, negociated his son's love-affairs advantageously. At times they sat down and drank with a party of girls. Then they changed their table, or resumed their stroll. And till midnight they were seen, their arms always linked in their intimacy, following the petticoats along the yellow pathways, under the glaring flame of the gas-jets.

When they returned home they brought with them from outside, in their coats, a something of the women they had been with. Their jaunty attitudes, the tags of certain suggestive phrases

and certain vulgar gestures filled the flat in the Rue de Rivoli with the fragrance of an equivocal alcove. The easy, wanton way in which the father shook hands with his son was enough to proclaim whence they came. It was in this atmosphere that Renée inhaled her sensual caprices and longings. She chaffed them nervously.

"Where on earth do you come from?" she asked them. "You smell of musk and tobacco . . . . I know I shall have a headache."

And the strange aroma did in fact perturb her profoundly. It was the persistent perfume of that singular household.

Meantime Maxime was smitten with a violent passion for little Sylvia. He bored his step-mother with this girl for several months. Renée soon knew her from one end to the other, from the sole of her feet to the crown of her head. She had a blue mark on her hip; nothing was sweeter than her knees; her shoulders had this peculiarity that the left alone was dimpled. Maxime took a malicious pleasure in filling their drives with his mistress's perfections. One evening, on returning from the Bois, Renée's carriage and Sylvia's, caught in a block, had to draw up side by side in the Champs-Élysées. The two women eyed one another with keen curiosity, while Maxime, enchanted with this critical situation, tittered under his breath. When the calash began to roll on again, his step-mother preserved a gloomy silence; he thought she was sulking, and expected one of those maternal scenes, one of those strange lectures, with which she still occasionally filled up her moments of lassitude.

"Do you know that person's jeweller?" she asked him suddenly, at the moment they reached the Place de la Concorde.

"Yes, alas!" he replied with a smile; "I owe him ten thousand francs . . . Why do you ask me?"

"For nothing."

Then, after a fresh pause:

"She had a very pretty bracelet, the one on the left wrist . . . . I should have liked to see it closer."

They reached home. She said no more on the matter. Only, the next day, just as Maxime and his father were going out together, she took the young man aside and spoke to him in an undertone, with an air of embarrassment, and a pretty smile which pleaded for pardon. He seemed surprised and went off, laughing his wicked laugh. In the evening he brought Sylvia's bracelet, which his step-mother had begged him to show her.

"There's what you want," he said. "One would turn thief for your sake, step-mother."

"She didn't see you take it?" asked Renée, who was greedily examining the bracelet.

"I don't think so . . . . She wore it yesterday, she certainly would not want to wear it to-day."

Meantime Renée approached the window. She put on the bracelet. She raised her wrist a little and turned it round, enraptured, repeating:

"Oh! very pretty, very pretty . . . . I like everything immensely, except the emeralds."

At that moment Saccard entered, and as she was still holding up her wrist in the white light of the window:

"Hullo!" he cried in astonishment. "Sylvia's bracelet!"

"Do you know this piece of jewellery?" she said, more embarrassed than he, not knowing what to do with her arm.

He had recovered himself, and threatened his son with his finger, murmuring:

"That rascal has always some forbidden fruit in his pockets . . . . One of these days he will bring us the lady's arm with the bracelet on."

"Ah! but it's not I," replied Maxime with mischievous cowardice. "It's Renée who wanted to see it."

"Ah!" was all the husband said.

And he examined the gaud in his turn, repeating like his wife:

"It is very pretty, very pretty."

Then he went quietly away, and Renée scolded Maxime for giving her away like that. But he declared that his father didn't care a pin! Then she returned him the bracelet, adding:

"You must go to the jeweller and order one exactly like it for me; only you must have sapphires put in instead of emeralds."

Saccard was unable to keep a thing or a person near him for long without wanting to sell it or derive some sort of profit from it. His son was not twenty when he thought of turning him to account. A good-looking boy, nephew to a minister and son of a big financier, ought to be a good investment. He was a trifle young still, but one could always look out for a wife and a dowry for him, and then decide

to postpone the wedding for a long time, or to hurry it on, according to the exigencies of domestic economy. Saccard was fortunate. He discovered on a board of directors of which he was a member a fine, tall man, M. de Mareuil, who in two days belonged to him. M. de Mareuil was a retired sugar-refiner of Havre, and his real name was Bonnet. After amassing a large fortune, he had married a young girl of noble birth, also very rich, who was looking out for a fool of imposing appearance. Bonnet obtained permission to assume his wife's name, which was a first satisfaction for his bride; but his marriage had made him madly ambitious, and his dream was to repay Hélène for the noble name she had given him by achieving a high political position. From that time forward he put money into new papers, bought large estates in the heart of the Nièvre, and by all the well-known means prepared for himself a candidature for the Corps Législatif. So far he had failed without losing an iota of his solemnity. His was the most incredibly empty brain one could come across. He was of splendid stature, with the white, pensive face of a great statesman; and as he had a marvellous way of listening, he gave the impression of a prodigious inner labour of comprehension and deduction. In reality he was thinking of nothing. But he succeeded in perplexing people, who no longer knew whether they had to do with a man of distinction or a fool. M. de Mareuil attached himself to Saccard as to a raft. He knew that an official candidature was about to fall vacant in the Nièvre, and he ardently hoped that the minister would nominate

him: it was his last card. And so he handed himself over, bound hand and foot, to the minister's brother. Saccard, who scented a good piece of business, put into his head a match between his daughter Louise and Maxime. The other became most effusive, thought he was the first to have had the idea of this marriage, and considered himself very fortunate to enter into a minister's family and to give Louise to a young man who seemed to have such fine prospects.

Louise, her father said, would have a million francs to her dowry. Deformed, ugly, and adorable, she was doomed to die young; consumption was stealthily undermining her, giving her a nervous gaiety and a tender grace. Sick little girls quickly grow old, and become women before their time. She was naïvely sensual, she seemed to have been born when she was fifteen, in full puberty. When her father, that healthy, stupid colossus, looked at her, he could not believe that she was his daughter. Her mother during her lifetime had also been a tall, strong woman; but stories were told about her which explained the child's stuntedness, her manners like a millionaire gipsy's, her vicious and charming ugliness. It was said that Hélène de Mareuil had died amid the most shameful debauchery. Pleasure had eaten into her like an ulcer, without her husband's perceiving the lucid madness of his wife, whom he ought to have had locked up in a lunatic asylum. Borne in these diseased flanks, Louise had issued from them with impoverished blood, deformed limbs, her brain threatened, and her memory already filled with a

dirty life. She occasionally fancied she had a confused recollection of a former existence; she saw unfolded before her, in a vague gloaming, bizarre scenes, men and women kissing, a whole fleshly drama in which her childish curiosity found amusement. It was her mother that spoke within her. This vice continued through her childhood. As she gradually grew up, nothing astonished her, she recollected everything, or rather she knew everything, and she reached for forbidden things with a sureness of hand that made her, in life, resemble a man returning home after a long absence, and having only to stretch out his arm to make himself comfortable and enjoy the pleasures of his homestead. This odd little girl, who by her evil instincts flattered Maxime, but had, moreover, in this second life which she lived as a virgin with all the knowledge and shame of a grown woman, an ingenuous effrontery, a piquant mixture of childishness and audacity, was bound in the end to attract him, and to seem to him even more diverting than Sylvia, the daughter of a worthy stationer, who had the heart of a money-lender, and was terribly homely by nature.

The marriage was arranged with a laugh, and it was decided that "the youngsters" should be allowed to grow up. The two families lived in close intimacy. M. de Mareuil worked his candidature. Saccard watched his prey. It was understood that Maxime should place his nomination as an auditor to the Council of State among the wedding-presents.

Meanwhile the fortune of the Saccards seemed to be at its zenith. It blazed in the midst of Paris

like a colossal bonfire. This was the moment when the eager division of the hounds' fee filled a corner of the forest with the yelping of the pack, the cracking of whips, the flaring of torches. The appetites let loose were satisfied at last, in the shamelessness of triumph, amid the sound of crumbling districts and of fortunes built up in six months. The town was become a sheer orgy of gold and women. Vice, coming from on high, flowed through the gutters, spread out over the ornamental waters, shot up in the fountains of the public gardens to fall down again upon the roofs in a fine, penetrating rain. And at night-time, when one crossed the bridges, it seemed as though the Seine drew along with it, through the sleeping city, the refuse of the town, crumbs fallen from the tables, bows of lace left on couches, false hair forgotten in cabs, banknotes slipped out of bodices, all that the brutality of desire and the immediate satisfaction of an instinct fling into the street bruised and sullied. Then, amid the feverish sleep of Paris, and even better than during its breathless quest in broad daylight, one felt the unsettling of the brain, the golden and voluptuous nightmare of a city madly enamoured of its gold and its flesh. The violins sounded till midnight; then the windows became dark, and shadows descended upon the city. It was like a colossal alcove in which the last candle had been blown out, the last remnant of shame extinguished. There was nothing left in the depths of the darkness save a great rattle of furious and wearied love; while the Tuileries, at the waterside, stretched out their arms into the night, as though for a huge embrace.

Saccard had just built his mansion in the Parc Monceau, on a plot of ground stolen from the Municipality. He had reserved for himself, on the first floor, a magnificent study, in violet ebony and gold, with tall glass doors to the book-cases, full of business-papers, but without a book to be seen; the safe, embedded in the wall, yawned like an iron alcove, large enough to accommodate the amorous exploits of a milliard of money. Here his fortune bloomed and insolently displayed itself. Everything seemed to succeed with him. When he left the Rue de Rivoli, enlarging his household, doubling his expenses, he talked to his friends of considerable winnings. According to his account, his partnership with the Sieurs Mignon and Charrier brought him in enormous profits; his speculations in house-property came off still better; while the Crédit Viticole was an inexhaustible milch-cow. He had a way of enumerating his riches that bewildered his listeners and prevented them from seeing the truth. His Provençal snuffle grew more pronounced: with his short phrases and nervous gestures he let off fireworks in which millions shot up like rockets and ended by dazzling the most incredulous. This turbulent mimicry of the man of wealth was mainly responsible for the reputation he had achieved as a lucky speculator. To tell the truth, no one knew him to be possessed of a clear, solid capital. His various partners, who were necessarily acquainted with his position as regarded themselves, explained his colossal fortune by believing in his absolute luck in other speculations, those in which they had no share. He spent money madly; the

flow from his cash-box continued, although the sources of that stream of gold had not yet been discovered. It was pure folly, a frenzy of money, handfuls of louis flung out of window, the safe emptied each evening to its last sou, filling again during the night, no one knew how, and never supplying such large sums as when Saccard pretended to have lost the keys.

In this fortune, which clamoured and overflowed like a winter torrent, Renée's dowry was shaken, carried off and drowned. The young wife, who had been distrustful in the earlier days and desirous of managing her property herself, soon grew weary of business; and then she felt herself poor beside her husband and, crushed by debt, she was obliged to apply to him, to borrow money from him and place herself in his hands. At each fresh bill that he paid, with the smile of a man indulgent towards human foibles, she surrendered herself a little more, confiding dividend-warrants to him, authorizing him to sell this or that. When they went to live in the house in the Parc Monceau, already she found herself almost entirely stripped. He had taken the place of the State, and paid her the interest on the hundred thousand francs coming from the Rue de la Pépinière; on the other hand, he had made her sell the Sologne property in order to sink the proceeds in a great piece of business, a splendid investment, he said. She therefore had nothing left except the Charonne building-plots, which she obstinately refused to part with, so as not to sadden that excellent Aunt Élisabeth. And in that quarter again he was preparing a stroke

of genius, with the help of his old accomplice, Larsonneau. For the rest, she remained his debtor; though he had taken her fortune, he paid her the income five or six times over. The interest of the hundred thousand francs, added to the revenue of the Sologne money, amounted to barely nine or ten thousand francs, just enough to pay her hosier and boot-maker. He gave her, or spent on her, fifteen or twenty times that paltry sum. He would have worked for a week to rob her of a hundred francs, and he kept her like a queen. And thus, like all the world, she respected her husband's monumental safe, without trying to penetrate into the nothingness of that stream of gold flowing under her eyes, into which every morning she flung herself.

At the Parc Monceau it was a delirium, a lightning triumph. The Saccards doubled the number of their carriages and horses; they had an army of servants whom they dressed in a dark-blue livery with drab breeches and yellow-and-black striped waistcoats, a rather severe scheme of colour which the financier had chosen so as to appear quite serious, one of his most cherished dreams. They emblazoned their luxury on the walls, and drew back the curtains when they gave big dinners. The whirlwind of contemporary life, which had set slamming the doors of the first-floor in the Rue de Rivoli, had become, in the mansion, a genuine hurricane which threatened to carry away the partitions. In the midst of these princely rooms, along the gilded balustrades, over the fine velvet carpets, in this fairy parvenu palace, there trailed the aroma of

Mabille, there danced the jauntiness of the popular quadrilles, the whole period passed with its mad, stupid laugh, its eternal hunger and its eternal thirst. It was the disorderly house of fashionable pleasure, of the unblushing pleasure that widens the windows so that the passers-by may enjoy the confidence of the alcoves. Husband and wife lived there freely, under their servants' eyes. They divided the house into two, encamped there, not appearing as though at home, but rather as if they had been dropped, at the end of a tumultuous and bewildering journey, into some palatial hotel where they had merely taken the time to undo their trunks in order to hasten more speedily towards the delights of a fresh city. They slept there at night, only staying at home on the days of the great dinner-parties, carried away by a ceaseless rush across Paris, returning sometimes for an hour as one returns to a room at an inn between two excursions. Renée felt more restless, more nervous there; her silken skirts gilded with adder-like hisses over the thick carpets, along the satin of the couches; she was irritated by the idiotic gilding that surrounded her, by the high, empty ceilings, where after fête-nights there lingered nothing but the laughter of young fools and the sententious maxims of old ruffians; and to fill this luxury, to dwell amid this radiancy, she longed for a supreme amusement which her curiosity in vain sought in all the corners of the house, in the little sun-coloured drawing-room, in the conservatory with its fat vegetation. As to Saccard, he was approaching the realization of his dream; he received the high finance, M. Toutin-Laroche, M. de

Lauwerens; he received also great politicians, the Baron Gouraud, Haffner the deputy; his brother the minister had even consented to come two or three times and consolidate his position by his presence. And yet, like his wife, he experienced nervous anxieties, a restlessness that lent to his laugh a strange sound of broken window-panes. He became so giddy, so bewildered, that his acquaintances said of him: "That devil of a Saccard! he makes too much money, it will drive him mad!" In 1860 he had been decorated, in consequence of a mysterious service he had done the préfet, by lending his name to a lady for the sale of some land.

It was about the time of their installation in the Parc Monceau that an apparition crossed Renée's life, leaving an ineffaceable impression. Up to then the minister had resisted the entreaties of his sister-in-law, who was dying of a longing to be invited to the court balls. He gave way at last, thinking his brother's fortune to be definitely established. Renée did not sleep for a month. The great evening came, and she sat all trembling in the carriage that drove her to the Tuileries.

She wore a costume of prodigious grace and originality, a real gem, which she had hit upon one sleepless night, and which three of Worms's workmen had come to her house to carry out under her eyes. It was a simple dress of white gauze, but trimmed with a multitude of little flounces, scalloped out and edged with black velvet. The black velvet tunic was cut out square, very low over her bosom, which was framed with narrow lace, barely a finger deep. Not

a flower, not a bit of ribbon; at her wrists, bracelets without any chasing, and on her head a narrow diadem of gold, a plain circlet which clothed her as with a halo.

When she had reached the reception-rooms, and her husband had left her for the Baron Gouraud, she experienced a momentary embarrassment. But the mirrors, in which she saw that she was adorable, quickly reassured her, and she was accustoming herself to the hot air and the murmur of voices, to the crowd of dress-coats and white shoulders, when the Emperor appeared. He slowly crossed the room on the arm of a short, fat general, who puffed as though he suffered from a troublesome digestion. The shoulders drew up in two lines, while the dress-coats fell back a step with instinctive discretion. Renée found herself pushed to the end of the line of shoulders, near the second door, the one which the Emperor was approaching with a painful and faltering step. She thus saw him come towards her, from one door to the other.

He was in plain dress, with the red riband of the Grand Cordon. Renée, again seized with emotion, saw badly, and to her this bleeding stain seemed to splash the whole of the sovereign's breast. She considered him little, with legs too short, and swaying loins; but now she was charmed, and he looked handsome to her, with his wan face and the heavy, leaden lids that fell over his lifeless eyes. Under his moustache his mouth feebly opened, and his nose alone stood out cartilaginous amid the puffiness of his face.

Worn out, vaguely smiling, the Emperor and the old general kept advancing with short steps, apparently supporting one another. They looked at the bowing ladies, and their glances, cast to right and left, glided into the bodices. The general leant on one side, spoke a word to his master, and pressed his arm with the air of a jolly companion. And the Emperor, nerveless and nebulous, duller even than usual, came nearer and nearer with his dragging step.

They were in the middle of the room when Renée felt their glances fixed upon her. The general examined her with a look of surprise, while the Emperor, half-raising his eyelids, had a red light in the gray hesitation of his bleared eyes. Renée, losing countenance, lowered her head, bowed, saw nothing more save the pattern of the carpet. But she followed their shadows, and understood that they were pausing for a few seconds before her. And she thought she heard the Emperor, that ambiguous dreamer, murmur as he gazed at her, immersed in her muslin skirt striped with velvet:

"Look, general, there's a flower worth picking, a mystic carnation, variegated white and black."

And the general replied, in a more brutal voice:

"Sire, that carnation would look devilish well in our button-holes."

Renée raised her head. The vision had disappeared, the crowd was thronging round the doorway. After that evening, she frequently returned to the Tuileries: she even had the honour of being complimented aloud by His Majesty, and of becoming a little his friend; but she always remembered the

Chapter III

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sovereign's slow heavy walk across the room between the two rows of shoulders; and whenever she experienced any new joy amid her husband's growing prosperity, she again saw the Emperor over-topping the bowing bosoms, coming towards her, comparing her to a carnation which the old general advised him to put in his button-hole. To her this was the shrill note of her life.

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